FIVE COMPLETE NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE!

MARCH

15¢

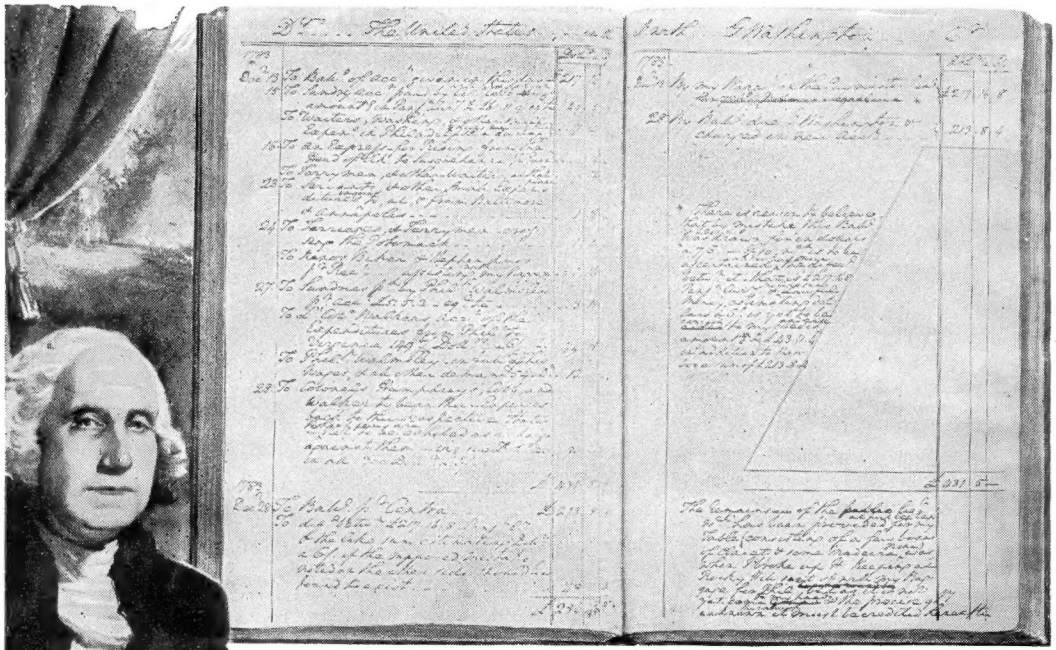
STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STOR[illegible] THE WEST !

THE RUNNING-IRON REBELS
VIVID RANGE-WAR NOVEL
by WALT COBURN

WAGONEERS' GUNSMOKE QUARANTINE
by HARRY F. OLMSTED

A DUKE BAGLEY NOVEL
by WM R. COX



Geo. Washington slipt here . . .

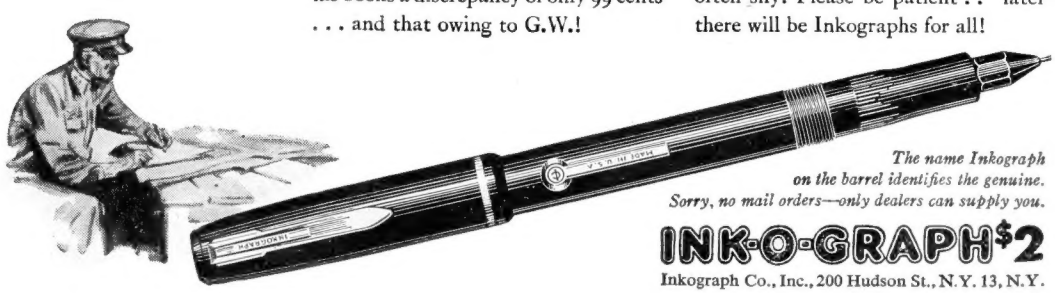
Named Commander-in-Chief two days before Bunker Hill, without staff or means, Washington had to find, feed, clothe, arm and train an army. And in addition, pay his own expenses, to be later reimbursed.

From 1775 to 1783, he kept in his own hand his set of books in double entry. Each colony issued its own currency, whose value varied with localities, had to be changed into "lawful" money. He travelled, often lacked headquarters, spent days in saddle, nights in the field.

Yet so meticulously did the General keep his expense accounts for eight years that Treasury auditors found in his books a discrepancy of only 99 cents . . . and that owing to G.W.!

The Father of His Country wrote with fragile goose quills. Today both GI's and Generals use precision instruments of penmanship . . . Inkographs. Produced with tolerances as fine as plane engines, the Inkograph is leak proof, fast acting, smooth flowing . . . with a diamond-hard point, sensitive to the light touch of Wac or Wave, sturdy enough for the heavyhanded sergeants . . . durable for millions of words, and the letters of a lifetime.

The preference of so many men and women in the services for Inkographs is a source of pride—and problems! Their needs come first, so stores are often shy. Please be patient . . later there will be Inkographs for all!



The name Inkograph on the barrel identifies the genuine.
Sorry, no mail orders—only dealers can supply you.

INK-O-GRAPH $2

Inkograph Co., Inc., 200 Hudson St., N.Y. 13, N.Y.

I WILL SEND A SAMPLE LESSON FREE to PROVE I can Train You at Home in Spare Time to BE A RADIO TECHNICIAN

J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute

Our 31st Year of Training Men for Success in Radio

I Trained These Men

$35 to $45 a Week in Own Shop

"Previous to enrolling for your radio training I made $12 per week in a hardware store. Now I operate my own repair shop, and often clear $35 to $45 a week." —FREDERICK BELL, 76 Golf Ave., St. Johns, Newfoundland.

$600 a Year in Spare Time

"At present I am doing sparetime radio work. I earned money in radio before graduating. My profits for the last twelve months were $600." — ERWIN F. BOETTCHER, Marinette, Wis.

Chief Engineer in Radio Station

"When I signed up with N.R.I. I had no other Radio experience. I am now Chief Engineer for Station WIBG, and have supervised installation of new modern broadcasting studios and equipment."—JOHN H. HENNINGER, 4744 Meridian Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

You May Never See a Better Time to Get Started in Radio

I will send you FREE, my Lesson, "Getting Acquainted with Receiver Servicing," to show you how practical it is to learn Radio at home in spare time. It's a valuable Lesson. Study it—keep it—use it—without obligation! And with this Lesson I'll send my 64-page, illustrated book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio" FREE. It describes many fascinating jobs Radio offers, tells how N.R.I. gives you Radio experience by practicing with SIX BIG KITS OF RADIO PARTS I send!

Many Opportunities Ahead for Trained Radio Technicians and Operators

The future looks bright for well-trained Radio Technicians, Operators. Keeping old Radios working is booming the Radio repair business. Profits are large—and peacetime prospects are bright, too. Think of the new boom in Radio Sales and Servicing that's coming—when new Radios are again available—when Frequency Modulation and Electronics can be promoted—when Television moves into its new era of expansion.

Broadcasting Stations, Aviation Radio, Police Radio, Loudspeaker Systems, Radio Manufacturing all employ qualified Radio Men at good pay—and most of these fields have a big backlog of business built up during the war, plus opportunities to expand into new fields opened by wartime developments. You may never again see a time when it will be so easy to get a start in Radio!

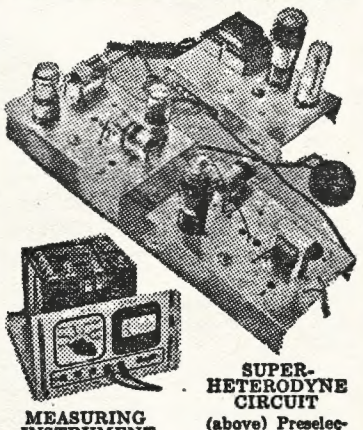
Many Beginners Soon Make $5, $10 a Week EXTRA in Spare Time

The day you enroll for my Course I start sending you EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that help show how to make EXTRA money fixing Radios in spare time while still learning. I send you SIX big kits of Radio parts as part of my Course. You LEARN Radio fundamentals from my illustrated, easy-to-grasp lessons—PRACTICE what you learn by building real Radio Circuits—and use your knowledge to make EXTRA money!

Mail Coupon for FREE Lesson and Book

These are fast-moving times. The opportunities beginners now have to get started in Radio may never be repeated. So take the first step at once. Get my sample Lesson and 64-page illustrated book FREE. No obligation—no salesman will call. Just mail Coupon in an envelope or pasted on a penny postal.—J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5CS9, National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

You Build These and Many Other Radio Circuits with Kits I Supply



MEASURING INSTRUMENT

(above) you build early in Course. Vacuum tube multimeter, measures A.C., D.C., R.F volts, D.C. currents, resistance, receiver output.

SUPER-HETERODYNE CIRCUIT

(above) Preselector, oscillator - mixer-first detector, i.f. stage, diode - detector - a.v.c. stage, audio stage. Brings in local and distant stations.

A. M. SIGNAL GENERATOR

(left) build it yourself. Provides amplitude - modulated signals for test and experimental purposes.

TELEVISION
●
ELECTRONICS
●
FREQUENCY MODULATION

My up-to-date Course includes training in these new developments.

GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK + SAMPLE LESSON **FREE**

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 5CS9
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE, without obligation, Sample Lesson and 64-page book, "Win Rich Rewards in Radio." (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name ..... Age .....

Address .....

City .....Zone.... State....4FR

FIVE SHORT NOVELS IN THIS ISSUE

STAR WESTERN

BIGGER AND BETTER STORIES OF THE WEST

VOLUME THIRTY-FIVE MARCH, 1945 NUMBER TWO

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **Five Complete Short Novels** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE RUNNING-IRON REBELS.....*WALT COBURN* 10
When Shorty Stroud, ex-rodeo champ, made his throw for that hell-for-lightning longhorn called Big Calico, he never knew how bitter and bloody a bushwhack range-war was wrapped up in the hide, horns and hoofs of that rebel steer.

HEAD NORTH TO WILDERNESS HELL!.....*TOM ROAN* 24
Boot-tough Swede Rolston, river-packet master, met head-on the hell-crew and captain of the rival steamboat in the strangest, deadliest duel that the Missouri wilderness had ever witnessed.

THE DUKE'S HANGTOWN HOMECOMING.....*WILLIAM R. COX* 42
"Tangle with Black Diablo, and you're punching your own ticket to a sudden grave," they told Duke Bagley. Which, to that reckless, lovable rapscallion, was just enough to start the ball rolling in blood and bullets!

HIDE-HUNTERS DIE HARD!..... *FOSTER-HARRIS* 56
Lane McCoy, booted out of the Army, learned in the heat and roar of battle that the fight of those who wore the troopers' blue was still his own—even though his only reward would be death without honor.

WAGONEERS' GUNSMOKE QUARANTINE...*HARRY F. OLMSTED* 70
In the seething frontier outpost of Westport, Rand Quarternight knew that a single turn of the cards would blaze for him and his outcast crew either their westering trail to glory—or swift and flaming death.

★ ★ **Star Features** ★ ★

THE BRANDING CORRAL.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* 6
Dramatic and informative sidelights on the living, colorful saga that was—and is—the West!

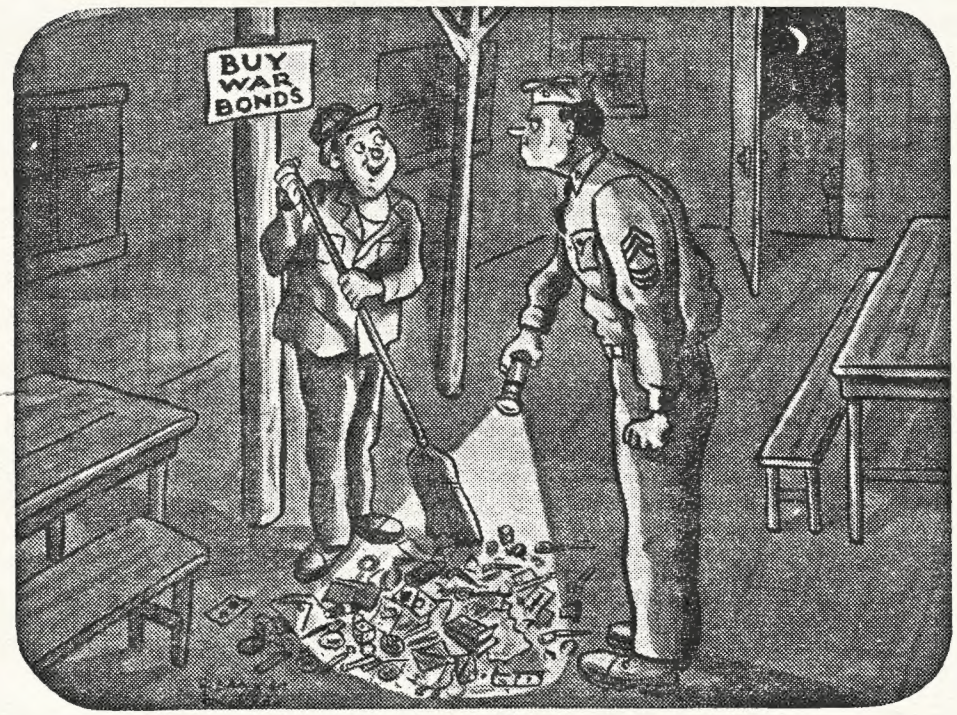
UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* 97
It takes more than a pair of hair pants and a ten-gallon hat to make a Western fiction character come to life!

APRIL ISSUE OUT MARCH 14TH!

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City 17. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 5, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1945, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. U. S. A. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.80. Foreign postage $1.00 extra. **Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17.** For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C., 17. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them.

Printed in U. S. A.

LIGHTER MOMENTS with fresh Dated Eveready Batteries



"What'll I do with it, Sarge? There ain't no carpet!"

"Keep your eye on the Infantry — the doughboy does it!" Won't you lend a few dollars to shorten the war? Buy more War Bonds!

RIGHT NOW, of course, the supply of "Eveready" flashlight batteries for civilian use is very limited. Nearly all our production goes to the Armed Forces and essential war industries. Their needs are tremendous and must come first.

But when this war is over, you'll be able to get all the "Eveready" batteries you want. And they will be new, improved batteries...they will give even longer service, better performance.

Fresh DATED BATTERIES Last Longer
Look for the date line

EVEREADY
TRADE-MARK

The word "Eveready" is a registered trade-mark of National Carbon Company, Inc.

★ The Branding Corral ★

Conducted by Strawboss

NO LESSON that the West has taught is more plain than that sheer brawn, not backed up by wit and nerve, is never enough to win mastery over either men or nature. The frontier demanded strength and endurance, to be sure, but the qualities of courage and quick thinking were perhaps more important than either. Doc Holliday, for example, though he was in ill health for all of his adult life, was one of the most-feared gunmen in the West. Sam Brown, on the other hand—But we'll let Jim Cleveland, of Tuskegee, Alabama, tell the story:

Dear Strawboss:

I've been a reader of *Star Western* for many years, and I'm especially impressed by it because it isn't all cowboys-and-rustlers stuff—you cover the whole field of the West pretty well, from the steamboat days to the great trail-drives. There's one promising field, though, that your authors have missed or passed over lightly, it seems to me—the gold-fields, especially the Washoe in Nevada.

Now there's a really colorful epoch for you. It had both of the prime qualifications for a setup in which anything could happen—a terrifically strong economic drive that pushed men of all sorts and conditions to one spot, and a place and time that ruled out any kind of established law. Rich man, poor man, miner and adventurer, intellectual and plug-ugly—they all swarmed into the Washoe. Mark Twain was there—just plain Sam Clemens then—and many others who later became famous.

Among those who arrived shortly after the lode was opened was one Sam Brown—a monster of a man, built like an ape, with red hair growing low on his forehead and whiskers tied in a knot under his chin. Brown packed two guns with 15 notches on each handle and carried a long knife in his right boot. He came swashbuckling into the camp in his dirty Prince Albert coat, huge Spanish spurs jingling; looked the place over and promptly killed a man—a little miner named William Bilboa who had not said a word to him. He did it with his knife, slashing the man a dozen times.

Then he looked around, beetling his brows, and said, "I'm the chief."

Nobody argued with him.

Shortly afterward he shot and killed Homer Woodruff, hand-picking his victim as before. A week or so after that, a man named McKenzie fell under his guns. The only offense of these men was that they looked like easy targets. It was Brown's way of proving his superiority.

Half an hour after his third killing, he went to sleep on a billiard table in full sight of a saloonful of men who had witnessed the murder, so sure he was that the camp was thoroughly cowed.

Then Bill Stewart came into the picture. Stewart was a six-footer of striking appearance, with his mane of tawny hair and beard, and he was as fearless as they come. Later he became perpetual U. S. Senator from Nevada; at the moment he was helping the district attorney at Genoa prosecute a murderer. This killer, as luck would have it, was a man who had toadied to Chief Brown. Brown, feeling his authority slighted, rode down to break up the trial.

When he stalked into the courtroom, it was as if a lightning-bolt had struck the place. The prisoner gave a whoop of delight, and spectators, lawyers and jury started scrambling for cover.

Without an instant's hesitation, Bill Stewart whipped out a six-shooter and aimed it at Brown. "Throw your hands!"

Taken by surprise, Brown put his hands in the air and stammered that he had not come to interfere with the trial, but to give evidence. Stewart walked up to him coolly, disarmed him, and led him to the witness stand, where for the next half-hour he made the big ruffian sweat with a merciless fire of questions. He tripped the "Chief" up again and again, confused him, harried him from one point to another, and showed him up for a liar and a scoundrel.

When he was at last released, Brown was burning with rage and shame. He had lost face, which was the most dangerous thing that could happen to him. His life would not be worth a nickel in the mine-fields unless he could regain his prestige, and quickly. He went looking for an easy victim.

First, he tackled the barkeep in a saloon across the street—a round-faced, genial man named Webster. Webster, however, promptly pulled a gun out from under the counter, and Brown backed down.

(Continued on page 8)

FREE

THIS AMAZING NEW BOOK FOR

7 DAY TRIAL!

HOW TO MAKE AND FIX THINGS FOR YOUR HOME!

NOW — IT'S EASY! BIG, NEW COMPLETE GUIDE HAS EVERYTHING BEGINNER OR EXPERT NEEDS TO KNOW!

Simplified, Step-by-Step Methods of One of America's Leading Authorities

384 BIG PAGES — COMPLETE INDEX

Now you can make the things you've wanted . . . do the repairing and redecorating that needs doing—and have fun, too! For here is "It's Fun To Make It Yourself," an amazing new guide that simplifies every step in wood and metal working . . . shows you short-cuts that save time, money, labor. See how easily you can follow the amazingly simple picture-instructions. Mail coupon now for 7-Day FREE examination. Send no money!

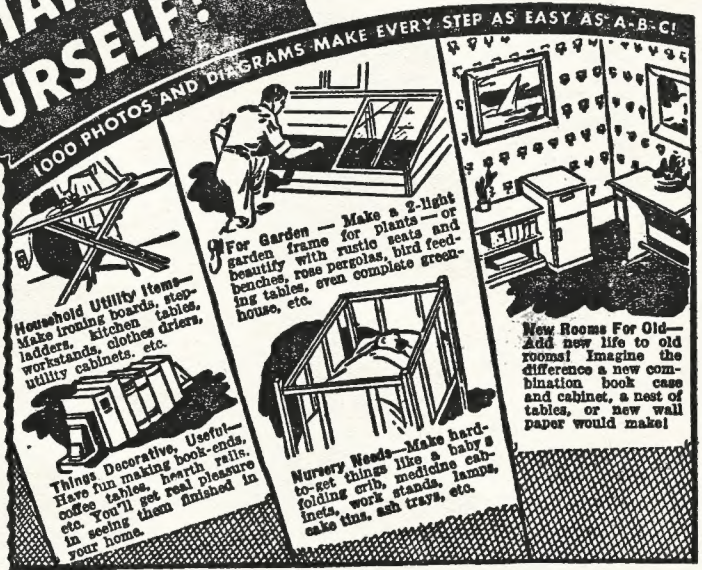
Here's How to Beat High Prices, Scarcities!

Even if you've never handled tools in your life—you can follow the simplified picture-direction in this new kind of book. So easy you can't possibly go wrong . . . thanks to its easy-to-understand, non-technical language and over 1000 helpful pictures!

Imagine saving $10 to $50 by making a nest of tables yourself. Or framing your own pictures. Imagine repairing and renewing old furniture—at practically no cost. Or adding a handsome rustic bench to your garden. Just one article you make—or one repair job you do—with the help of this book can easily save you many times the cost of the entire volume. So mail coupon now for your FREE examination. No Obligation!

IT'S FUN to make a collapsible bed tray, scores of other things.

1000 PHOTOS AND DIAGRAMS MAKE EVERY STEP AS EASY AS A-B-C!



Household Utility Items—Make ironing boards, step-ladders, kitchen tables, workstands, clothes driers, utility cabinets, etc.

For Garden — Make a 2-light garden frame for plants — or beautify with rustic seats and benches, rose pergolas, bird feeding tables, even complete greenhouse, etc.

New Rooms For Old—Add new life to old rooms! Imagine the difference a new combination book case and cabinet, a nest of tables, or new wall paper would make!

Things Decorative, Useful—Have fun making book-ends, coffee tables, hearth rails, etc. You'll get real pleasure in seeing them finished in your home.

Nursery Needs—Make hard-to-get things like a baby's folding crib, medicine cabinets, work stands, lamps, cake tins, ash trays, etc.

Look at this Partial List of Things You Can Make and Do!

MAKING
- —Nest of Tables
- —Medicine Cabinet
- —Combined Cabinet and Bookshelves
- —Fire Screen
- —Double Stepladder
- —Deck Chair
- —Table Lamp
- —China Cabinet
- —Modern Sideboard
- —a Burglar-proof Hinge
- —a Shelf Bracket
- —Objects of Metal
- —Rustic Garden Bench
- —Rose Pergola
- —Greenhouse

Furniture Repairs
Panelling a Room
Replacing Sash Cords
Lifting Flooring
Draught Prevention
Picture Framing
Glass Cutting
Fitting & Replacing Window Panes
Fitting Hinges
Fitting Shelves
Converting Spare Room into Workshop
Using Garage as Workshop
Choice and Care of Tools
Wax Polishing, Fuming, etc.
Choice of a Lathe
Sheet-Tin Work
Bent Wire Work
Etching on Brass, Copper and Steel
Paperhanging
Interior Painting
Graining

And many other things you'll have FUN making and doing with help of this new book!

Examine 7 Days FREE!

Send No Money! Mail Coupon NOW!

There never has been a book like "It's Fun To Make It Yourself." 384 BIG pages, over 1000 photographs, working diagrams, sketches —all the facts you should know about building and equipping your home workshop; selecting, manipulating, sharpening, caring for your tools; joints, jointing; finishing woodwork; wood turning; wood, metal construction projects; how to do home repairs, maintenance; fundamentals of house-painting; plastering, paperhanging; big section of things to make for garden.

MAIL COUPON NOW!

Once you go through this practical guide you wouldn't give it up for many times its small price. Let us send "It's Fun To Make It Yourself" for one week's free examination. Then, if you're delighted with it (as we're sure you will be) send only $1—and one month later pay small balance of only $1.95 (plus few cents postage).

If, for any reason, you decide not to keep book, return it and owe nothing. You have everything to gain, nothing to lose, by mailing FREE Examination Coupon NOW to Book Presentations, 31 West 57th Street, New York 19, New York.

MAIL FREE EXAMINATION COUPON TODAY!

FREE EXAMINATION COUPON

BOOK PRESENTATIONS
31 W. 57th Street, New York 19, N. Y. PP3

Without obligation, send me immediately (prepaid for a week's free examination), IT'S FUN TO MAKE IT YOURSELF, 384 pages, over 2000 How-To-Do-It Illustrations, indexed, handsome cloth binding. At end of week I will return book and owe nothing. Or I will keep it and send $1 then; and $1.95 one month later (plus a few cents postage charges).

☐ Check here if you desire beautiful De-Luxe Edition bound in special-finish Simulated Leather — gorgeously grained, stamped in genuine gilt. Only $1 extra.

NAME .....
(Please Print Plainly)

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE .....
(Please List Zone Number — if any)

☐ CHECK HERE AND SAVE MORE. SHIPPING WEIGHT 3 lbs. Send full cash with this coupon and we will stand shipping costs. Same return privileges!

(Continued from page 6)

Down the street a way, he braced a citizen named Bob Lockridge. Lockridge also showed fight, and Brown crawfished.

Obviously, the news had spread. It was more imperative than ever that he should kill again, but he would have to get out of town to do it. He rode out to a roadhouse a few miles from Genoa. The owner, a chubby little man named Henry Van Sickle, took his horse. Dismounting, Brown drew his gun. "Van Sickle," he said, "I'm goin' to kill you."

Van Sickle took to his heels immediately, with Brown after him, roaring and brandishing his guns. Past the startled occupants of the dining room they tore, through the kitchen and out the back way. Brown was delayed by falling over a chair, and when he reached the back yard, his quarry was nowhere to be found. Brown hunted for a while, roaring threats, and at last, feeling somewhat better, went away.

Van Sickle, white and shaken, came out from the haystack where he had been hiding. He was ordinarily a peaceable man, but one thing could goad him to action—fear. He considered himself a marked man, and came to the conclusion that the only way he could avoid being killed by Brown was to go after the Chief and kill him first.

Accordingly, he took his shotgun, which was loaded with birdshot, crammed some buckshot on top of that, and took the trail. A few miles down the road he caught up with Brown and fired both barrels at him. Brown was wounded in the side. It was the fourth time the worm had turned on him in one day. Surprised and terrified, he fled.

Van Sickle followed, though his gun was empty. At a nearby ranch house he borrowed more ammunition, reloaded and then went on. At Mottsville he caught up with Brown again and they traded shots, without damage on either side. Again Brown spurred away.

Grimly, Van Sickle kept up the pursuit. He reached Old's Station without a sign of the killer, and was told there that Brown had not passed. Surmising that he must have taken another trail, he bushed up outside the station and waited.

Sure enough, ten minutes later Brown rode up and dismounted. Van Sickle stepped out into the open and pointed the shotgun at the big man. Brown didn't try to go for his guns. Instead, he dropped onto his knees in abject terror and pleaded for his life. Ignoring his shrieks for mercy, Van Sickle gave him both barrels in the chest.

Next day, a coroner's jury deliberated five minutes and returned a remarkably succinct verdict:

"It served him right."

Pioneer Rations

Thank you, Mr. Cleveland. Now here's a letter from Norman Stout, of El Centro, California, with some information that ought to make us happier about not being able to get a sirloin or a rib roast as often as we'd like:

Dear Strawboss:

Trying to get my mind off steaks, I started poring over some old books this morning and came up with some facts about the things our pioneer ancestors ate in lieu of food that I think will interest you. They interest me, anyway.

In the late 1850's, during the Great Migration, wagon-trains usually provisioned themselves before starting with only a few staples: flour, bacon and pork, coffee, sugar, salt and pepper, saleratus or yeast powder. Of course, they could not carry enough food to last them the entire trip, and had to rely as much as possible on what game and vegetables they encountered as they traveled westward.

Buffalo meat, when it was to be had, was esteemed a great delicacy (maybe it's worth the two-fifty they're charging in night-clubs, at that). One traveler wrote that he was offered six large slices of the meat, of which he intended to eat three but ended by devouring all. At supper that night buffalo meat was again served and he ate until he was ashamed to continue, though he had not had his fill. Still later he went to another man's wagon and was offered still more of the meat, whereupon he again stuffed himself until shame made him stop—and went to bed still hungry!

The pioneers were not always so lucky, however. Captain Marcy and his men, in their journey from Fort Bridger to Fort Massachusetts in 1857, ran out of tobacco, coffee and salt. For tobacco, they used the inner bark of a red willow, called *Kinnickinick*. It isn't stated how good a substitute this was, but I leave it to those who have been smoking everything from pencil-shavings to shredded wheat lately, to imagine.

For coffee, they used the dried leaves of the horse-mint, and it probably tasted just the way it sounds. As for salt, "By burning the outside of our mule steaks, and sprinkling a little gunpowder upon them it did not require a very extensive stretch of the imagination to fancy the presence of both salt and pepper."

When more solid food ran dangerously low, the pioneers often had to fall back on one of the Indians' most unpalatable inventions—pemmican. This was usually buffalo meat, dried and powdered, placed

(Please turn to page 94)

GET INTO RADIO ELECTRONICS & TELEVISION NOW!

Hundreds of Industries Need Radio and Television Men Now and for Great Future Demands

The man trained in electronics is wanted not only in Radio and Television, but in Aviation, Transportation, Communications, . . . in the designing, engineering and operation of hundreds of industries today and for years to come. Learn how great the field is for YOU...How you may GET INTO BUSINESS FOR YOURSELF. Mail the coupon now.

Send for FREE Lesson and Prove to Yourself How Quick and Easy You Get Ahead in Radio by the NEW

SHOP METHOD HOME TRAINING

Learn by Doing!

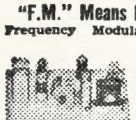
Use real Radio Equipment Furnished with your Course

Experience is the best teacher. You learn by experience with the exclusive National Shop-Method of Home Training — actually build many circuits and do experiments with the big kits of standard radio parts included in your training equipment at no extra cost to you.

Build a superheterodyne receiver. Make tests and conduct experiments that show you the why and how of electronics. Build an audio oscillator, signal generators and other instruments with the parts and supplies included in your course.

"F.M." Means Future Money

Frequency Modulation (F.M.) is here to stay. Thousands of F. M. licenses have been granted by the government F. C. C. all over the country. Learn what this means to you.



Get ready for TELEVISION. Get your share of the RADIO SERVICE Business. Here is a sensationally improved way for you to get the right training—a thoroughly proved system whereby you study in spare time—odd hours, even minutes—and have the advantage of actual shop experience behind you.

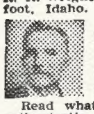
This exclusive shop method of home training comes to you right from one of the world's greatest vocational educational centers—the resident training shops and experimental laboratories of National Schools. It is the sound, practical training based on actual experience of qualified instructors and engineers who have prepared thousands of National graduates now employed in the radio industry.

It is up-to-date—matches the progress constantly being made in modern radio, television and electronics. It is time tested. National Schools has been training men for higher pay and greater opportunity for more than a third of a century. Fill out and mail the coupon below for details.

Shop Method Training Wins Good Jobs

"My latest offer was $5,800.00 as Radio Photo Engineer . . . but I'm doing well where I am now engaged. I am deeply indebted to National." — Joseph Grumich, Lake Hiawatha, New Jersey.

"Due to my training at National I was selected to instruct in the laboratory work of Navy and Marines." — R. R. Wright, Blackfoot, Idaho.



"I believe National offers the best course to be had. . . . Keep up the good work."—O. K. Ivey, Washington, D. C.

Read what hundreds of other enthusiastic students have written about National Training. Send in your coupon today.

Be Sure in Post-War

Now, right now, is the time to prepare for SUCCESS AND SECURITY in the great expansion after the war. The field is wide open. Trained men will get the preference in the broadcasting stations — in industry — will make quick progress with small capital in their own business. Soldiers, sailors and marines make use of your free time to get ready for the future. Study while still in uniform. Thousands of men in the armed forces have trained at National Schools under U. S. Government sponsorship.

See for Yourself

Now, right now, is the time to grasp the great opportunity of today—a successful career for tomorrow. Get into the big money, rapid advancement, a position of importance. A BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN. The industry is crying for trained men everywhere. A rapidly expanding business—probably the greatest in industrial history—holds out the promise of a rich future—prosperous security. But to win it you must be ready. Well-trained men ONLY are wanted.

Examine the National Shop Method of Home Training carefully. Be convinced. Study the lesson we will send you FREE. No obligation of any sort. Fill out the coupon and mail it today.

GET THESE 2 BIG BOOKS FREE!

Learn for yourself just how easy this SHOP METHOD HOME TRAINING gives you the practical, down-to-earth experience you can never get from theory alone.

NATIONAL SCHOOLS

LOS ANGELES 37, CALIFORNIA EST. 1905

MAIL OPPORTUNITY COUPON FOR QUICK ACTION

National Schools, Dept. 3-PP
4000 South Figueroa Street, Los Angeles 37, California

(Mail in envelope or paste on penny post card)

Mail me FREE the two books mentioned in your ad including a sample lesson of your course. I understand no salesman will call on me.

NAME ..... AGE.....

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... STATE.....

Include your zone number

THE RUNNING-IRON REBELS

The two pardners stood there, side by side, facing the charge.

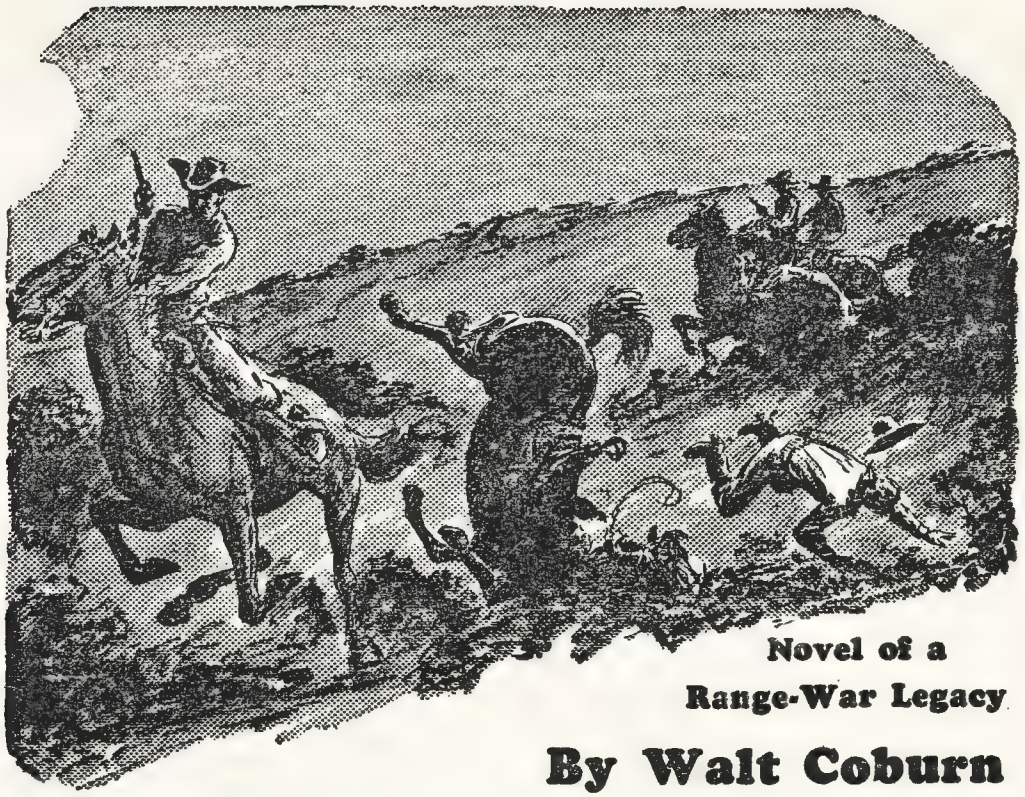
Big Calico had never known any man's brand or earmark, and, so they said, never would. But when Shorty Stroud, ex-rodeo champion, dabbed his loop on that four-footed devil, he had to meet a greater danger than sharp hoofs or stabbing horns—a bloody bushwhack stampede that swept like fire through all the wild Apache Springs range!

CHAPTER ONE

Powdersmoke Pardners

SHORTY STROUD was one of the best ropers and bulldoggers in the rodeo circuit, but he couldn't keep away from poker. The night after he and Clyde O'Grady broke the world's record team-tying at Cheyenne, and doubled their prize money on side bets, Shorty started in to run his stake up into real money in a stud game.

About sunrise Clyde O'Grady located his little red-headed pardner in the hotel room where the all-night game was still going full blast. The players and hangers-on saw the



Novel of a Range-War Legacy

By Walt Coburn

big black-haired, black-eyed O'Grady come in and shut the door behind him. The poker players tensed a little. The others, those that knew him, swapped covert looks. Clyde O'Grady was black Irish and because he was quiet and never drank booze or blew his money, hardly ever laughed at their rough horseplay, they called him funeral-faced and a wet blanket. Now, when he walked in looking for his pardner, they took no pains at all to conceal their resentment. They had a hunch what was coming, and they didn't like it, because Shorty Stroud was way ahead of the game.

Six-foot Clyde O'Grady stood behind his pardner's chair. "Let's go, Shorty."

"One more hand, Clyde. I'll git the deal—"

O'Grady scooped up the money in front of Shorty and crammed it into his pockets. Then he lifted Shorty out of his chair by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his levis. Shorty was a little drunk and there was a sort of shamefaced grin on his freckled face.

"What the hell you think you're doin', O'Grady?" snarled the tinhorn gambler banking the game. He was a rodeo contestant of no little ability, but made more money gambling than he did roping or bulldogging or riding broncs. He was called Heavy and he traveled on his shape.

"Shorty's too far ahead of the game," complained another cowboy contestant, "to pull out."

A flat grin twisted Clyde O'Grady's mouth. His black eyes were watching Heavy.

"I'm no gamblin' man," said the big Irishman. "I don't savvy the burro. But it looks to me that the sensible time to quit is before you lose your shirt. The main idea of gamblin' is to win. Well, Shorty's winners. So he's leavin' you hot sports to poker it out amongst yourselves. Let's go, pardner."

Heavy kicked back his chair. A couple of others moved to block the door. Backed by three of his gambling cronies, Heavy rushed at big Clyde O'Grady.

The big cowpuncher stepped back against the wall. He knocked one man down with a looping swing and kicked another in the belly, then braced himself to meet Heavy's bull-like charge. Clyde was fifty pounds lighter, but he was fast on his feet and he was cold sober. They crashed together like two fighting bulls.

Shorty Stroud spat on his calloused hands, grinned widely, then grabbed a chair and waded in.

There were eight or ten tough, partly drunken cowpunchers tangled in the ruckus. A few of them took advantage of this opportunity to battle out personal grudge fights, so

that there were two or three separate scraps in full swing.

The din of battle rose in its fury. Occupants of nearby hotel rooms were rudely wakened from their early-morning slumber. Men in nightshirts or long underwear spilled out into the hallway.

The door smashed open and Shorty Stroud stumbled out backwards. Clyde O'Grady's tall bulk filled the doorway as he backed out, arms flailing. Heavy made a final groggy charge. Clyde, bloody as a butcher, met it with a pair of swinging, bruised fists. Heavy grunted and went down on all fours and then slid down on his face, his burly inert form blocking the open doorway.

Clyde O'Grady shook the blood from his smashed nose and wiped sweat and blood from his eyes. He grabbed Shorty and yanked him to his feet, then half-dragged, half-led him down the hallway. Sleepy-eyed men, and a few scared but curious women in nightgowns and wrappers, ducked back into their rooms.

Down the wide stairs the pardners went, through the almost deserted lobby where a few drunks were sleeping it off, out onto the sidewalk and down the street.

Shorty was still clutching an almost-full bottle of bourbon. "I kep' 'em off your back, Clyde. Have one?"

"Come on, runt. Rattle your hocks. We got a train to ketch." The big rawboned O'Grady dragged his blood-spattered pardner along.

"But we gotta git our outfits, Clyde!"

"They're in the baggage car. Checked. Shake a laig."

"Our rope horses, Clyde!"

"Loaded in the horse car."

The locomotive whistled, and they had to run to make it. Clyde picked up Shorty Stroud and tossed him through the open side door of the special horse car coupled to the passenger train. The train was moving when Clyde climbed in. They sprawled on the floor of the horse car, panting heavily. Shorty sat up and wiped blood from his smashed lips and took a pull at the bottle. Their saddles and chaps and bedrolls were in the car. Shorty blinked his battered eyes and counted six cowhorses tied in the car. He leaned back against a bale of hay and got a second, then a third count.

He shook his head bewilderedly. "I keep tallyin' six head! Them Possum an' Skewball geldin's of ourn musta had twins in the night. Born growed and broke an' saddle-marked!"

"I made a dicker, Shorty. Got them four ponies dirt-cheap."

Shorty stared at him. "We got no business with a whole damn cavvy, Clyde. Shippin' an' feed bills'll keep us busted."

"We'll pick up six-eight-ten head more when we git there," Clyde said. He had pulled up his torn shirt and undershirt and unbuckled a money belt he wore next to his hide. He took crumpled banknotes from his pockets, smoothed and counted them into piles, then folded the money carefully and stowed it into the pouches of the glove-leather money belt.

SHORTY took off his hat and scratched his mop of wiry red hair. "When we git to where, big ox?"

"Apache Springs, Arizona. We're done with rodeoin', my short complected, bowlegged amigo." One of Clyde's rare grins lit up the solemn bleakness of his swarthy face.

"But looky here, Clyde, we've just clumb to the top of the heap. A gunnysack full of them fancy trophies. Goshamighty, World Champeens. We'd be havin' to fight off herds of purty gals with our hats—"

"Gold-diggin' females. Tinhorn gamblers. Buyin' drinks for the house. Then one day you'll ride too many broncs. Your brains jarred loose inside your skull. And you'll be just another rodeo tramp bummin' free booze and the price of a cheap meal. No average in it, son. Me'n you are goin' into the cow business. It'll be jerky and frijole beanses. Town once in six months providin' we git caught up with our chores. Ten years from now we'll be shippin' steers by the trainload. Then we kin hire the hard work done and set back in the shade and whittle."

"Apache Springs," Shorty Stroud shook his head. "Never heard of the place."

The grin left Clyde O'Grady's face, leaving it bleak as dark granite. A brooding look clouded his eyes.

"It's where I come from, pardner. Apache Springs, Arizona."

Shorty took a cautious drink and corked the bottle. Then he leaned back against the bale of hay and fished in the pockets of his torn shirt for tobacco and cigarette papers. He rolled and lit a sodden cigarette.

Clyde O'Grady stood in the open doorway staring out at the passing landscape. The silence between the two cowpunchers had grown a little strained.

Clyde O'Grady was the fastest and most consistent winner at calf and steer roping in the whole circuit. He was frugal, close fisted, more Scots than Irish in his ways. And because he had the sober man's intolerance for drunks, he never was able to join in the hell-raising good times these drifting cowboy contestants enjoyed. He was set apart from the rest of the fraternity of bronc riders, bulldoggers and ropers. They claimed he had done a stretch in the pen somewhere and had come out of prison a little stir-locoed. Bothered, he'd fight—and he was hard to whip. So they let him alone.

But Shorty Stroud had the ways of a friendly wirehaired terrier pup and liked everybody. When nobody wanted to pair off with the glum-visaged Clyde in the team-tying, Shorty signed himself up in that event with Clyde O'Grady and they won day money.

But there was no sort of real friendliness between the two men, until Shorty drew a bad 'un at Pendleton and bucked off and when he came alive he was in the hospital, laid up with a broken leg. Broke.

"I'll have to stand you fellers off," he told the doctor, "till I git patched up and back to contestin'. I'll sell my rope horse—"

They told him his hospital bill was paid in advance. Clyde O'Grady had tended to it and left a couple of hundred dollars to boot. And he'd left word that Shorty Stroud wasn't to worry. He'd taken care of Shorty's rope horse.

Shorty had blinked his eyes and there had been a hard lump in his throat. Because of all the many cowboy contestants he knew, Clyde O'Grady was the only man who owed him absolutely nothing. Not a dollar.

Shorty overhauled Clyde O'Grady at Prescott, Arizona, where they won first money team-tying. By the time they finished the Fort Worth and Denver shows, Shorty had paid Clyde back, and had enough left over for drinks and a few hands of poker.

By that time their pardnership was cemented, and Clyde had taken over the job of riding herd on Shorty. He coaxed a long list of names out of Shorty—the names of men who had borrowed money from him and forgotten to pay it back. Clyde O'Grady made some more bitter enemies when he quietly but firmly collected a lot of those bad debts. He never turned that reclaimed money over to the prodigal Shorty. Instead, Clyde 'banked' it in his money belt, and kept a painstaking account of it in the little vest pocket tally-book he carried. It totaled a sum that ran well into four figures.

Clyde had never spoken of his past, never dug up anything from his backtrail to tell Shorty. Until now, Shorty Stroud had never given it much thought. He took Clyde O'Grady at his face value, grinned at the big cowpuncher's habit of big-brothering him night and day, and kept looking for the chance to fight for his big pardner. And whenever any man said a word against Clyde O'Grady, that man, regardless of who or what he was, had the short, husky, freckled, red-headed Shorty to whip.

"IT'S cow country, Shorty." Clyde O'Grady broke the silence when they had bathed the blood and sweat from their battered faces and put on clean shirts. "It's stood on end some. Rough. And them mountain cattle are plenty spooky. That's why there's a lot of two- and even three-year-old mav'ricks roamin' the roughs. I got word that now's the time to move in. I've made the dicker. Bought the irons of half a dozen remnants. Registered our own iron, the Ladder brand. It belonged to my daddy. I got it registered to me'n you now. There's a chunk of land goes with it. A big spring that never went dry and durin' a long, long drouth, it furnished plenty water in the crick. There's a cabin and barn and corrals. A couple of trap pastures where we'll hold what wild cattle we gather. We'll gather enough remnants to pay our way outa debt and have enough profit to buy whiteface stuff. Barrin' tough luck, Shorty, we'll actually be in the cattle business before too long. . . . I ain't put a dollar of yours into it. So if you don't cotton to the notion, there's nothin' tyin' you to it."

Shorty Stroud felt hurt, and he spent the next quarter-hour telling his pardner so, profanely—until the look in Clyde's black eyes stopped him, breathless. Shorty pulled the cork with his teeth and took a drink to dampen his dry throat.

"It's where I was born and raised, Shorty," Clyde said. "My dad was bushwhacked there at the Ladder ranch. His murderers were never arrested. And the Law rode up on me there one night and put handcuffs on me and took me to jail. The Law tried me for cattle rustlin' and sent me to the pen. I did five years in the pen and it broke me more ways than one, before I got pardoned out. I've bin out nearly five years. Now I'm goin' back to the home ranch. There's some folks that won't welcome me back. There might be some gun-trouble. I wouldn't want you to git tangled up in it blind. That's why I kept your money out of it. I got it here."

Shorty Stroud spat on his thick stubby hands and grinned. "Deal me in, you big Mick, or I'll pound you down to my size and wipe up the floor of this horse car with your big carcass! Deal me in fer a pardner. Or so help me, I'll—"

"Tuck in your shirt-tail, son. It's a-poppin'. If that's the way you feel about it, you're in. Plumb in. But don't ask me to drink on it. Booze helped drygulch my old man."

Clyde O'Grady did not enlarge on the subject, and Shorty Stroud let it go at that. Together they looked over the four new rope horses Clyde had swapped for. Four young Steeldust geldings that had the speed and conformation and savvy it took to make a cracker-jack rope horse in the rough country. Together with Shorty's Papoose and Clyde's Skewball, the pair of rope horses they had turned down a thousand dollars apiece for, they had the start of their two strings of cow-horses. They would need ten head apiece

before they could begin work. Another ten head apiece for a fresh change of mounts. A few head of good stout Mexican mules to pack their beds and grub and camp outfit. Pack outfits. Horseshoes. Grub. Barb-wire to repair the trap pastures and the horse pasture at the Ladder ranch. The cabin and barn and corrals might need patching up. It would take money. They wouldn't have two dollars, Clyde said, to rub together or jingle when they got done buying what they'd need. But they'd have an outfit.

"How's that Apache Springs country stocked," grinned Shorty Stroud, "fer wimmin?"

"It ain't." Clyde O'Grady's jaws clamped like a steel trap.

CHAPTER TWO

The Song of Big Calico

IT WAS brush-popper cowpunching in that rough, brushy country, and it took Shorty Stroud a few weeks to get the hang of it. But he learned fast, with Clyde along to show him the ropes, and before the first month passed he was tallying as many maverick ears as his big pardner did. They packed running irons and when they caught a slick-eared maverick after a wild race, they built their quick branding fire of dry sticks and heated the running iron which was no more than a steel rod with a J curve at the end, ran on the Ladder brand, and kept the tip of an earmarked ear for tally. And they were tallying plenty.

Shorty's whiskered face was raked by mesquite and catclaw until Clyde said he looked like he'd tried to tame a bobcat. But after he caught onto how to dodge the raking limbs the scratches healed and he told Clyde he hardly ever wiped his short nose on a catclaw any more. And he quit fouling his cocked loop on the brush by holding it thrown back across his shoulder while his running horse dodged and twisted down a steep slant in the wake of a gravel-kicking maverick. And he learned from Clyde how to out-fox the wily outlaw steers they roped and tied to a tree and later led down to one of the trap pastures. And because it was exciting and dangerous work that called for all a cowpuncher's skill and guts, Shorty Stroud took to it like a drunk to a whisky-jug. Shorty Stroud, at the end of that first month, was as wild as the wildest brush-popper. Gathering those renegade wild steers, some of them six-eight years old and off-colored Mexican stock, was more sport than you'd get in a lifetime of rodeoing. And while the payoff wasn't in prize money and the glory of cheering grandstands, it warmed a man's guts to feel he was gathering his own cattle.

Their neighbors, scattered back in the mountains, let them strictly alone for a long time. But now and then while they cooled their running irons or squatted on their hunkers to watch some wild *orejano* trot off ringing his tail with a big fresh Ladder burned on his hide, Clyde O'Grady would point a long arm and Shorty Stroud would squint from under the brim of a battered hat and sight a rider, or more likely two or three riders sitting their horses on some high point watching them.

"That'll be some of them greasy-sack pool cowmen, Shorty," Clyde would tell him.

Or he would grin mirthlessly and say, "A couple of Anchor brush-poppers, son, a-lookin' us over."

THE greasy-sack pool was made up of small outfits like the Ladder. They were called greasy-sack because they worked with little pack spreads and carried their grub in sacks that were scabbed with grease and dirt from hard usage.

The Anchor was the biggest cow outfit in that part of Arizona, owned by a big millionaire syndicate that had cattle outfits scattered from the Argentine and Texas to Montana and across the Canadian line. At this season, between round-ups, their cowhands were paired off and scattered at range-branding camps, where they range-branded stuff the round-ups had missed and doctored cattle that had gotten screw worms.

"My daddy," Clyde told Shorty, "was ketched in the broad middle. Tom O'Grady pointed the first big Anchor herd here from Texas. Ramrodded the Anchor for years. Then he married and the owners of the Anchor staked him to his own outfit. He'd bought out the Ladder for the Anchor and they turned it over to him, iron and all. And wished him well. He got along with 'em till they sent Martin Sauers here to ramrod the Anchor. Mart Sauers undid a lot that Tom O'Grady had done for the big Anchor. That daddy of mine had whupped the greasy-sack cattle rustlers into shape and them he didn't run off, he had eatin' outa his hand. Some of 'em was ornery, a few was friendly enough after he'd whupped respect into their rustler hides.

"Mart Sauers is a warthog, more ways than one. In no time at all he was crowdin' them greasy-sack ranchers agin' the skyline. His tough cowhands packed guns along with their runnin' irons and Sauers give 'em all orders to drag hungry loops. Tom O'Grady run a few of 'em off the Ladder range. But a lone man can't set a saddle night and day. And they was shore a-whittlin' deep on his cattle.

"But Sauers wasn't content with that. Tom O'Grady had rode over to the Anchor home ranch on Blue River and give Sauers a beatin' that put him in the hospital a few weeks. So

Sauers, lackin' the guts to fight in the open like a white man, commenced playin' dirty politics. He put a man named Kirwin in the sheriff's office. Kirwin was sorta straw-bossin' the greasy-sack pool outfit. And that left Tom O'Grady at the mercy of the Anchor and the greasy-sack cattle-rustlers. . . ."

Clyde O'Grady rolled and lit a cigarette. Shorty held the silence until his big Irish pardner went on with the rest of it.

"Anybody but Tom O'Grady would have pulled stakes and found a peaceful range," said Clyde. "But that old man of mine wasn't a quitter. And my mother had died and he'd reached for the jug to drown out the pain of losin' her. Boose and gun-work don't mix. I was sixteen and doin' the work of a full cow-puncher crew when Tom O'Grady got too drunk to watch behind and they drygulched him. . . ."

"Mart Sauers still ramrods the Anchor, don't he, Clyde?"

"Yep. And makin' 'er pay."

"And this double-crossin' Kirwin?"

"Is still Sheriff Kirwin," said Clyde O'Grady. "Still takin' his orders from Mart Sauers. Warmin' a chair at his office and a crew of tough deputies doin' the dirty work. I got a notion you'll be meetin' both them blacklegs before long. Them ridge riders we bin sightin' from day to day is turnin' in reports on us, son."

SHORTY STROUD was rearing to tangle with Mart Sauers and Sheriff Bill Kirwin. But Clyde kept warning him never to go for his gun unless he was crowded into it, and then to be certain he had better than an even break. And even if he won the gun-fight, the best he could hope for would be the worst of it. And the Yuma pen was the worst stinking hell-hole on earth. Better to hang.

"Five years is the average life of a convict at Yuma. I'd never have lived long enough to git out, only the warden made a trusty outa me and I spent the most of my stretch outside the walls. The warden got me pardoned. He's a white man. He's workin' to git the Arizona pen moved away from that Yuma hell-hole. . . But it ain't moved yet and that's where the Law will send you if you have to use that gun, son. So keep it deep in your chaps."

But Clyde himself wouldn't take off his gun even to sit down at the dinner table. He slept with it under his pillow.

Clyde said it was his old friend, the warden at Yuma prison, who had written him to come back because the sign was right. And he had negotiated the buying of those remnant brands for Clyde.

To make slick, easy shaves a snap,
So toughest whiskers lose the scrap,
Use Thin Gillettes—save dough and time—
Four thrifty blades cost just a dime!
Made of easy-flexing steel hard enough to cut glass
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
Gillette
4 for 10c
Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

"He ain't the warden at Yuma prison no more, son. He's the new Captain of the Arizona Rangers. And he is one man I shore want you to shake hands with some day. . . . But Cap won't show up here till he's needed. Till the sign is right. Then he'll likely come a-shootin'. And he won't have his sights lined on me'n you, son."

That was how things stood when Shorty Stroud jumped out Big Calico high up at the head of Rough Canyon.

Big Calico was a maverick. A big black-and-white spotted maverick bull that they claimed must be at least seven years old. He had never had his long, black pointed horns sawed. Never been branded or earmarked. He had been roped at and missed countless times. Caught once or twice, he had charged horse and rider. He'd gored both horses to death, killed one man and put the other brush-popper in the hospital with a ripped belly and back and tromped-in ribs. Big Calico was a killer—fast, tricky, wise to every foot of the mountain country with its boulders and brush, its twisting trails that rimmed out through some remote saddle. He was seldom sighted, and only at a far distance. That big *orejano* was as wily as an Apache. Big Calico was already a legend. His saga had been made into a song of many verses that told of wild chases by light of day and of a moonlight night, with a verse added for every cowhand who matched and lost his race with Big Calico.

IT WAS drizzling rain, the ground slippery as soap, in the early morning when Shorty Stroud, riding his top horse Possum, topped the high, brushy ridge at the head of Rough Canyon. He heard the crash of brush and saw a big spotted bull quit a heavy manzanita thicket and go down the steep side of the canyon, wide-open. Kicking mud and gravel, dodging boulders, crashing headlong through brush, a flash of big black and white in the gray early-morning drizzle.

A wild cowboy yell tore from Shorty Stroud's mouth. His loop cocked back across a faded denim jacket dark with rain, and the sure-footed Possum took the steep, treacherous slant at a run.

Then a horse and rider showed down yonder, coming up the canyon through the huge boulders and spotted patches of brush—loop cocked and ready. Some greasy-sack or Anchor cowhand was dealing himself in.

"That's my ox!" shouted Shorty Stroud. "Keep that rope on your saddle! That Big Calico's my bull meat! Oh, damn your dirty, sneakin', two-bit, picayune heart to hell! Oh, you cold trailin', snake-souled—!"

The cowhand below had headed the big spotted maverick bull when Calico hit the foot of the slant, faltered a ways on the level ground, then stampeded straight down the floor of Rough Canyon. Straight into that waiting loop he went, as if he'd shoved his wide black horns through on purpose.

"I got salt on Big Calico's bushy tail!" The high-pitched voice of the brush-popper below taunted Shorty, and the high canyon walls tossed the mocking echo back and forth.

Then there was the sound of a thudding, dull, sickening crash. The taunting shout shrilled to a thin scream of terror. Brush crashed and the bellow of Big Calico filled the canyon.

Shorty's Possum slid a good thirty feet down a sheer cutbank of soft rain-glazed black shale, almost turned over at the foot of the precipitous slant, scrambled like a cat, and stretched to a run. Shorty jerked his cocked loop down from a wet denim shoulder. Brush slashed and swished against his bullhide chaps. His loop swung.

The gray horse was down on its side, the rope tied to the saddle horn, the brush-popper pinned under the horse's side by one leg. The big, slobbering, blowing, spotted bull swung around at the end of the taut rain-stiff catch-rope that had looped the wide horns. Those horns spread as wide as the span of a man's outstretched arms—needle-pointed, glistening black from the wet rain. The big spotted bull was blowing, nostrils flared, long strings of slobber trailing from the bawling mouth, set to charge.

Possum and Shorty broke brush, and the bull's head swung and lifted. Possum jumped like a jackrabbit to clear a boulder, and carried Shorty in behind the spotted black-and-white rump. Shorty's loop swung as the big bull ignored him and charged, head lowered, at the gray horse on the ground. Shorty's loop picked up both hind legs and jerked taut. Possum swung sideways and whirled and dug into the wet sand, and the rope tied to the saddle horn whined like a taut fiddle string as the weight hit the other end. The big spotted bull was jerked off the ground and busted hard and flat on its side and Shorty quit the saddle with his hogging string clamped between his strong white teeth. Then he jumped astraddle of the bull's hindquarters and the strong hogging string looped both hind legs below the hocks and above the black cloven hoofs.

Shorty yanked his jackknife from his chaps, opened the big blade, and cut the catch-rope that had head-roped the big bull. Then he ran on fast bowed legs to the head of the gray horse, straddling the horse's neck and pulling the horse's head back to hold the animal down. The rider was lying there in a motionless awkward shape, one free chaps-covered leg jerked loose from the tapadero, the other leg pinned to the ground by the heavy weight of the horse.

The rider who had stolen the sneak march on Shorty Stroud was either dead or knocked out cold as a wedge.

SHORTY'S teeth bared in a grin as he yanked the latigo and freed the front and flank cinches and the breast-strap roping rig. Then he let the gray gelding scramble to its feet. Barebacked, bridle reins trailing, the gelding got to its four feet and trotted off crabwise to keep from stepping on the reins. Then he halted and stood there, head lifted, whistling softly through flared nostrils.

The hogtied spotted bull was bawling and slobbering and throwing its head so that the long horns churned up showers of wet sand.

"Come alive, you sneakin', brush-poppin' loop thief," said Shorty. "I'll stand you back up on your feet. Then I'm goin' to knock you down faster than all your cattle rustlin' friends could pick you up. If they was here to pick you up, which they ain't. Come alive, mister, because I'm goin' to hammer the livin' daylights outa your skunk hide!"

He yanked at the inert brush-popper. The cowhand's wet hat fell off. A mop of curly hair, chestnut-colored, tumbled free. A pair of smoky gray eyes opened, long thick black lashes fluttering. The skin that showed beneath an ugly smear of dirt and blood was smooth and soft. The brush-popper was a girl!

Shorty Stroud's blunt jaw slacked and he choked on a strong cuss word. He stared, wide eyed, and his stubby hard-muscled hands let go their rough grip on the denim brush jumper. He recoiled as if he'd taken hold of a hot stove.

The girl's bruised lips spread and her white teeth showed in a faint, bitter smile. She tried to get to her feet, but her right ankle had been wrenched by the fall. She winced and let out a little gritty moan and sat down on the wet sand.

"All right," her voice was a painful croak, "it's your *orejano*. But you needn't make a speech about it."

The color was coming back into her skin where it wasn't scraped raw and bleeding. She was close to tears, but they were tears of futile anger rather than fright or pain.

"I'll make a song about it, lady." Shorty yanked the rain-weighted old Stetson from his wiry red head. His grin was wide across his freckled face. "How you and me ketched Big Calico. I'll run the Ladder on his left side and burn your iron on and we'll save Big Calico for our bull and claim every black an' white spotted calf in this part of Arizona. What's your brand, ma'am?"

"K on a Rail."

"Ain't that Sheriff Bill Kirwin's brand?"

"It is. And I'm Bill Kirwin's daughter Kay. Don't tell me your pardner Clyde O'Grady has never told you—" Her voice trailed off and a dull flush crimsoned her bruised face.

"Clyde ain't much of a hand at talkin'. I'll rustle you a hatful of water. Then we'll brand our Big Calico bull. But his ears stay slick and we ain't sawin' them long horns. Because I want that big ox to take his own fightin' part if ever some hungry-loop son has the gall to snare 'im. Better lemme look at that laig of yourn. See kin you wiggle your toes. If you kin, it ain't broke."

Shorty started to unbutton his wet denim brush-jacket, to pillow her head while she lay back. But she stopped him with a smile.

"I'm all right. If you'll saddle my horse I'll make it back to the ranch. And it's your Ladder maverick. I'm everything you called me while you were comin' down the slant. I've got no business over here on your range."

"Then what fetched you so far from home this early in the mornin'?" Shorty asked bluntly.

He was a little hurt now, and sore because this girl would not share the maverick she had head-roped.

Kay Kirwin shook her head stubbornly. "It don't matter. But before we get into a quarrel about it, well, you saved me and my horse from getting gored to death, and I want you to know how grateful I am. I'll try to pay you back, somehow. And I'm— Oh!"

A rider was crowding his horse down off the rim. It was Clyde O'Grady, and he was coming down the steep slant at a reckless speed.

The color left the girl's bruised face and her gloved hands clenched into small fists.

THERE were times when Shorty Stroud knew when to be quiet and fade out of sight. He did it now. He was off somewhere, gathering dry sticks for the branding fire, when Clyde O'Grady rode up.

But he could hear every word spoken, and he told himself that if he happened to squat to pick up a stick or bend over to paw around in under the wet brush for wood, and he caught a glimpse of what was going on, well, hell, he couldn't rustle dry sticks with his eyes shut and anyhow he had to stay near enough so that if they needed him and hollered, he'd hear.

A fine time for that big Mick to come charging along. Just when a man was getting in his first lick and sort of acquainted. Kay Kirwin might be almighty easy on a cowhand's eyes with the gravel washed off her hide. Man, oh, mister, marry a gal like that and you had something. Her head-roping and him heeling. On through life. Here was a real sure enough cowgirl. That outfit of hers

had seen hard usage. She'd hung a sure loop on Big Calico. And game. That ankle of hers was a painful job. . . .

"You hurt, Brat?" That was Clyde's voice, hoarse as a crow's.

And then the girl's voice, with a sob in it. "My leg's broke."

Shorty stiffened. "Why that darned little liar!" he muttered. He peered through the brush.

He saw Clyde swing from his blowing horse and squat on his hunkers beside her. The girl lay back, propped on one elbow with her hat off. Clyde's face was like dark gray granite as he bent over her. And then her arms were around Clyde's neck and she was sobbing, her curly chestnut head against his big wet denim shoulder.

Shorty felt empty and a little sick inside. He grabbed a handful of wet sticks and cussed himself under his breath for a darned fool. Jealous? Hell, no. But it made a man sick to his stummick to see a girl trap a man with an out-and-out lie and then lollygag all over him like that, using tears and kisses to soften him up. Well, she come by it natural. And if Clyde was that big a sucker, let him have her. . . .

Then he heard Clyde's voice, flat-toned and final. Anger in it. "It won't work, Brat. Peddle your molasses at an easier market. That leg ain't broke and there ain't a tear in your eye. Now wash your face and get on your pony and git for home. Keep off my range, and tell Sheriff Bill Kirwin that goes double for him."

There was a sound like smacking two wet leather chaps together, and Shorty heard Clyde grunt. Kay Kirwin's voice was brittle now, choked with fury.

"You big coffin-faced, mule-headed, sheep-brained idiot! What any girl in her right mind can see in you, I don't know. Why don't you peddle tombstones for a livin'? You got one for a heart. You come near me and I'll claw your mean eyes out. You—you—you—"

Big Clyde O'Grady stepped up on his horse and rode down the canyon. His voice, hard and toneless, called to Shorty.

"You bin cryin' for females, son. You got one. Good luck. You'll shore need it. See you at camp if you git back alive. Better brand Big Calico and turn 'im loose before he dies of starvation."

Clyde O'Grady rode out of sight in the drizzle. Shorty carried his armful of partly dry sticks back to the little clearing.

"You let him talk to you," said Kay Kirwin, "like you were a crosseyed, lame-brained stepson."

She was sitting up, wiping gingerly at her bruised face with a large silk neckerchief she'd worn knotted around her throat. Her teeth were showing in a forced grin, her smoky gray eyes still bright with angry tears. But she wasn't sobbing now. She'd turned off the tears like a spigot.

Shorty's ears felt hot and he managed a lopsided grin. "Aw, ol' Clyde's all right. You kinda got under his hide. He's shore ringy, ain't he? Clyde can't stand joshin'."

"I wasn't joshin'. Of all the mule-headed humans on earth—"

"Yes, ma'am." Shorty got his little blaze going and squatted on his spurred bootheels, fanning it gently with his hat until the bigger sticks caught and the blaze crackled.

Kay Kirwin got to her feet and limped to the creek. She was gone a while and when she came back her face was bathed clean of dirt and blood, though it still oozed from a raw cheekbone. She slid her running iron from its leather scabbard on her saddle and shoved its curved end into the fire.

"You run on your Ladder, I'll burn my K on a Rail on Big Calico. That makes us pardners in the wildest bull that ever roamed the Rough Canyon. . . Unless you're backin' down on the deal?"

"Me? Gosh, no. You shore got the makin's of a black eye," grinned Shorty.

They branded Big Calico and turned him loose, then watched the big spotted bull climb the brushy slant, bawling and ringing his tail. Shorty said he felt shore sorry now they'd burned his hide.

"He'll feel plumb ashamed when he gits back to them wild cows of his. Ketched and branded. By a woman, at that."

Kay cut Shorty a quick, searching look. He grinned back at her. Then they both began laughing. Rough Canyon tossed back the gay echoes.

CHAPTER THREE

Ladder to Boothill

IT WAS long after the rise of a full round moon when Shorty Stroud rode back to the Ladder ranch, his head in the stars, whistling the tune of Big Calico. Grand, impossible dreams were milling around inside his wiry red-haired skull.

But when he neared the ranch his song died and his eyes lost something of their shine. He rode up to the barn and unsaddled with an almost furtive silence. After all, Clyde O'Grady was his pardner. And stealing your pardner's girl is a lowdown thing. Mean and picayune and plumb lowdown. Shorty Stroud felt and looked and acted like a sheep-thief when he opened the cabin door.

He found Clyde stretched out on his bunk reading an old mail-order catalogue. Clyde's

black eyes gave him a long, penetrating look. One heavy black eyebrow lifted.

Shorty's face reddened and his gray-green eyes slid away from his pardner's searching look. He kicked the door shut and tossed his hat on his bunk and shed his faded denim brush-jumper. His saddle-warped legs carried him to the coffeepot on the back of the little sheet-iron stove and he turned his back on Clyde and filled a tin cup with strong black coffee.

The silence in the cabin was getting strained to the breaking point. Shorty piled his plate with grub that was going to taste like so much sawdust. He carried it over to the rawhide-covered table.

That was when he saw the sheet of brown wrapping paper with big, bold lettering on it.

YOU GOT TILL SUNRISE TO
QUIT THE COUNTRY.

Shorty stared at it, his gray-green eyes narrowing under crooked bleached brows.

"What the hell!" His red head jerked up.

"It was tacked to the door," said Clyde O'Grady, "when I got back to the ranch early this evenin'."

"Oh." Then a short, brittle laugh broke from Shorty Stroud's tight throat.

"What's so comical about it, son?"

Shorty's freckled face reddened. He grinned uneasily. "Well, there for a second, Clyde, I figgered—I figgered you'd wrote it. That you meant it for me—on account of I rode home with Kay because she had a sprained ankle. And I was—"

One of Clyde's rare grins lighted his dark, black-stubbled face. Something akin to mirth twinkled like tiny red sparks in his black eyes.

"We're pardners, Shorty. Regardless."

"I'm a hell of a pardner, mister. Tryin' my damndest to mav'rick your girl. I'm a low-down, yellow-bellied snake. I'm—"

"Did Kay Kirwin tell you she was my girl?" Clyde O'Grady's head was lowered, his face almost concealed by the big open catalog.

"Nooo. . . . No, she didn't come right out—"

"Then forget it, son."

Shorty shoveled a forkful of pinto beans into his mouth.

"Lucky," said Clyde O'Grady, "you wasn't bushwhacked on your way home. Don't go sashayin' off alone thataway no more. Them fellers is playin' for keeps."

Shorty nodded and washed down the tasteless *frijoles* with black coffee.

"That warnin', Clyde. It gives us till sunrise. You got ary plans figgered out?"

"I'm not runnin'. But it would be a good time for you to deal yourself out, son."

"Me?" Shorty kicked back his chair. "Now you looky here, feller. We're pardners. Mebbe you figger you got a right to talk like that because I taken Kay home. So that tears it. I won't see her no more. I ain't sellin' out to nobody. I'll fight back to back with you till hell's no more. Just don't go runnin' off at the head about me sneakin' off when my pardner's in a tight. I can't stummick that kinda talk."

"Save it, son. Save it for Mart Sauers—and Sheriff Bill Kirwin. You'll need the energy you're a-wastin'."

"Sheriff Bill Kirwin?"

TARGET—GERMANY! When those bombers go roaring over Berlin and Hamburg, it's your dimes and dollars that speed them on their way. . . . Your money, lent to the United States Government for a return of four dollars on every three you put up! For your country, and for your own future in a better world, buy now!

"Still polishes his law-badge, son. And they'll all be ridin' right behind it when they come.

"You're the boss, Clyde."

"And Sheriff Bill Kirwin has a new deputy. Remember Heavy Jones?"

"Fer gosh sakes! Not Heavy! Who sold him chips in our game?"

"Mebbeso Heavy figgers it's still the game I busted up in that hotel room at Cheyenne. He's a bad loser. Like as not he trailed us here. Had a medicine talk with Sauers and Sauers told Bill Kirwin to pin a deputy badge on Heavy's shirt. And Kirwin takes all his orders from Mart Sauers."

SHORTY rolled and lit a brown paper cigarette. Thinking back across those carefree hours he'd spent riding almost back to the Kirwin ranch with Kay, he was trying to recall the few things she had talked about that went deeper than their careless banter. She had been clever enough with her woman's way of keeping their talk in a lighter vein. But she had dropped one or two remarks. . . .

"You'd gamble on that, Clyde?"

"On what, Shorty?"

"On Sheriff Kirwin takin' all his orders from Sauers?"

"Yep." Clyde's trap-jawed reply was final.

"Your Skewball agin' my Possum?"

"I'd shore hate to set you afoot, son."

"I'll risk it. Comes the big showdown, Sheriff Bill Kirwin sides us. That's the bet."

"It's a deal."

Clyde O'Grady wanted to ask questions, a lot of questions. But he was too stubborn, too almighty prideful even to hint at one. Shorty knew it and went on eating. He almost enjoyed his pinto beans and jerky.

The cabin was lighted by a couple of candles that threw distorted shadows across the adobe walls and beamed ceiling. The alarm clock on the shelf ticked loudly. Shorty washed and dried his dishes and lay back on his bunk. His eyes were half-closed and he was thinking about Kay Kirwin. He had met and flirted with a lot of girls and gone his careless way. This time it was different. He was, he told himself, roped, throwed and hogtied. And Kay Kirwin was in love with his pardner Clyde. She had to be or she wouldn't have thrown herself at Clyde; and when Clyde had tossed her aside she'd picked herself up and brushed herself off and tackled Shorty. All the sign pointed at just that. But Shorty wouldn't believe what the sign read. He shook his head stubbornly, unaware that Clyde, sprawled on the opposite bunk and pretending to read the big catalogue, was covertly watching him.

"Somethin' on your mind, son?"

"Uh? Well, kinda. Yeah. You said once that Sheriff Bill Kirwin doublecrossed you. That his reason was, he wanted to git aholt of the Ladder outfit. And that Kirwin mighta had a hand in drygulchin' your father, Tom O'Grady. Then why didn't Bill Kirwin grab the Ladder outfit when you went to the pen?"

"Mebbeso, Shorty, Sauers went back on the deal. Told Kirwin to whistle another tune. And by then he had too much on the badge-polisher so's Kirwin can't holler 'Robber'."

Shorty grunted, then broke the next silence with a blunt question.

"Who pried you outa the Yuma pen, Clyde?"

"Cap Riling. He was the warden."

"I heard it different."

Clyde O'Grady sat up and swung his long legs over the edge of his bunk. The color drained from his tanned face. There was a red glitter in his black eyes. "Say that again, Shorty."

"It's hard to put into words, Clyde. It was somethin' Kay Kirwin said when she wasn't thinkin'. It kinda slipped out and then she ketched herself quick and turned the talk away from it and I couldn't steer it back. But I got the notion that you'd still be rottin' in the Yuma pen if it hadn't bin for Sheriff Bill Kirwin."

Clyde was on his feet now. He was fully clothed and hadn't taken off his boots. His spurs were still buckled on and they jingled loudly as he stood up. He looked excited and almost wild-eyed and he glared at Shorty until the little red-headed cowpuncher wondered if his big pardner was going to kill him then and there.

"I'd give everything I got to believe that, son!" Clyde croaked harshly. "Think hard, feller. What was it the Brat said?"

Shorty stared up at his big pardner. "You kin ask Kay when you see her next time. But guard yourself in the clinches."

"Think, you knothead. Damnit, this means life and death, or damn' near it!"

"Shut up!" Shorty quit his bunk with a catlike leap. He blew out the candles. "Listen!" His voice was a hissing whisper in the dark. "There's somebody outside the door!"

There was a thudding sound against the barred door. A scratching noise. Then a low, moaning voice.

"Lemme in, Clyde! I'm all shot to hell.... It's me—Bill Kirwin!"

IT WAS an old, old bushwhacker trick and Clyde O'Grady wasn't falling for it. But Shorty slipped past his big pardner and slid back the wooden bar and yanked open the door. A short, paunchy, hatless man staggered inside. His legs gave way and he went down with a heavy thud. Shorty slammed the door and slid the bar into its slots. Clyde O'Grady's hands were sticky with blood when he lifted the groaning man up and laid him on his bunk and told Shorty to go light a candle.

Sheriff Bill Kerwin's jowled face was mottled, and pain seared his bloodshot eyes. His clothes were sodden with blood. He reeked of stale booze.

"Cap Riling sent me, Clyde," he mouthed. "I'd have gotten here quicker, only that big deputy Sauers sent me was bushed up along the trail. He drygulched me. Left me for dead. I had a time a-gittin' here. You got any likker? I kin use some."

Shorty had a jug cached. He poured a tin cup half full and held it to the wounded man's mouth. Kirwin gulped it down. Clyde had a basin of hot water and he cut away the sheriff's shirt and undershirt and went to work. There were three bullet rips and none of them dangerous, but they were spilling a lot of blood.

"I'd like to live long enough, Clyde, to clean my slate. Sauers killed Tom O'Grady. He framed you on that cattle rustlin'. And he had me where he wanted me, Clyde.... He'd ketched me butcherin' an Anchor beef. Bloody-handed at the job. Had me dead to rights. I was scared to go to the pen. I had the missus

and kids to think about. I had to play it the way Mart Sauers told me. He had me nailed to the cross. . . .

"The best I could do was fix it with the warden to treat you good—till I could git you pardoned. And I had to go easy because Sauers woulda sent me to the pen if he ketched me. So Cap Riling taken the deal off my hands. Me'n him and your daddy Tom O'Grady had come up from Texas together with the first Anchor trail herd. Cap savvied. He kept his mouth shut. When the sign was right I told him and he sent fer you to come back. I had to keep pretendin' to string along with Sauers, till the time come to throw in with you. But now I'm here I ain't a damn' bit of good to you. . . . And Sauers and his tough gunslingers is comin' tonight. Sooner than Cap figgered. And I didn't have time to git word to the greasy-sack pool boys. I don't deserve a drink of your likker, Clyde."

"The hell you don't!" There was a genuine grin on Clyde O'Grady's face. "Anyhow, it's Shorty Stroud's jug. Heard the latest, Bill? The Brat and my Shorty pardner roped and branded Big Calico."

"The hell! So that's where the Brat was all day. I left word with Martha to tell the young 'un to saddle a fresh horse and round up them greasy-sack ranchers and send 'em here. If I kin borrow another drink, now, from the crock—"

Shorty poured him another big one. Clyde had the wounds washed and tightly bandaged and the color was coming back into the sheriff's beefy face.

"Martha was in a huff," he said. "Seems like her'n Kay had a run-in. The Brat saddled a horse and hightailed it for your range, to see you and patch things up between the pair of yuh. Martha kin be mighty high-chinned herself. Prideful. . . . How'd that young 'un happen to ketch Big Calico? Hellamighty, there'll be no livin' with that Brat from now on. She shoulda bin born a boy, anyway."

Clyde grinned. "Shorty won't see exactly eye to eye with you on that, Bill. He's got that dyin' calf look in his eye. It's plumb sickenin'."

There was a hard, bright twinkle in Kirwin's eye when he cut Shorty a wink. "If you'da got a look at yourself in the shavin' glass a few years back, Clyde, about the time you got up the nerve to set on the sofa holdin' hands with my older 'un, Martha, and if you coulda listened cold-eared to your tellin' her how a cowboy's life was filled with lonesomeness, and how she built the best pie in the world—"

Shorty Stroud wanted to give three cheers, then kick the ears off that big close-mouthed pardner of his. *Martha! Not Kay! For gosh sakes!*

"You boys," said Sheriff Bill Kirwin, his grin fading, "better bush up out yonder. Fetch me my saddle gun and plenty ca'tridges and leave me the jug. Let Sauers' warthawgs charge the cabin. Then you boys buy in."

The pardners nodded grimly.

THERE WAS a lopsided three-quarter moon setting, and it would break daylight in an hour. Clear patches of ground were bathed in a dim light; the brush and trees and rocks and buildings stood out as if carved out of black cardboard. The candlelight inside the cabin showed faintly behind drawn blinds.

Smoke came from the chimney, and there could be heard the rattle of tin dishes and the moving of a skillet on the stove and other sounds that Sheriff Bill Kirwin, alone inside, managed to create so that a prowler would take it for granted the two pardners were in there, getting an early-morning breakfast.

They had found Bill Kirwin's horse and unsaddled the big gelding and stabled him, and then Clyde O'Grady and Shorty Stroud, armed with six-shooters and saddle guns, took their stand behind the brush and waited.

Clyde O'Grady was a changed man. There was a grin on his face and a sparkle in his black eyes. He kept telling Shorty that Kay's older sister Martha couldn't ride a lick and didn't know one brand from another, but she was the prettiest girl on earth and the best cook and housekeeper. A cowman's wife's place was in the kitchen, Clyde claimed. Wearing an apron, not chaps. And he'd been a muleheaded fool ever to let anything come between them, and as soon as he got his gun-chores done he was crawling all the way to the Kirwin ranch to tell Martha he'd been a bonehead.

"Yeah. I know," said Shorty. "Tell me just once more. But quit hollerin'. They'll hear you yonder side of the mountain. And you'll go afoot, you big shut-mouthed son. We had a bet, recollect? You lost your Skewball pony."

"You're plumb welcome, son," grinned Clyde O'Grady, "to the whole Ladder remuda. . . . Yonder they come, pardner."

A dozen or fifteen riders appeared, scattering, surrounding the place. Martin Sauers, big, rawboned, was giving orders in a hard-bitten voice. "Scatter out. When I give the word, ride at that cabin and don't pull up for nothin'."

"Clyde O'Grady," sounded the too-loud voice of Heavy Jones, "is my bear meat."

"Quit runnin' off at the head, Heavy. Just git the job done and you kin spend the rest of your life tellin' it scary. You ain't done too good, so far."

"I taken care of Sheriff Bill Kirwin. And by the hell, I'm claimin' that little Kay wildcat."

Clyde gripped Shorty's shoulder to hold him down where they were crouched. There was murder in the little redhead's eyes.

"Tuck in your shirt-tail, son," whispered Clyde. "Don't spoil the batter. . . . Shoot the belly off Heavy. I'll gun-rassle Sauers."

They charged then, yelling and shooting. Bullets smashed the cabin windows. They came at it from all sides. And from inside the cabin Sheriff Bill Kirwin's gun cracked its defiance.

They were in the middle of the clearing when big Clyde O'Grady quit the shelter of the brush with a banshee yell that sounded wild and high above the gun-racket.

"It's me'n you, Sauers!" Clyde yelled.

Shorty Stroud was beside his big pardner, a wide grin on his freckled face and his hat slanted across hard gray-green eyes and the saddle carbine at his shoulder cracking.

"I got the deal, Heavy!' shouted Shorty. "The bets are down and the jackpot's open!"

Mart Sauers and Heavy Jones whirled their running horses. The others kept on towards the cabin. Sauers and Heavy rode straight at Clyde and Shorty and the two pardners stood there, legs braced, crouched a little, their guns spewing streaks of fire.

Even then, Martin Sauers would have tossed the brunt of it to Heavy and taken to the brush. He lay low across the saddle horn and reined his horse in behind Heavy, then dug his spurs deep and swung sharply to the right, headed for the shelter of the heavy manzanita thicket along the creek. But his horse, thrown off balance, stumbled and went to its knees and somersaulted. Sauers kicked both feet from the stirrups and was thrown clear. He landed running.

CLYDE O'GRADY headed him off. Then Sauers dropped to one knee, fired. A bullet clipped Clyde O'Grady's skull and he swayed like a drunken man. His shot at Sauers kicked up dirt at the Anchor ramrod's feet.

Shorty Stroud heard bullets whistle around his head. He felt the thudding sting of one in his left shoulder. Heavy was riding him down, shooting as he came. Shorty stood on his short bowed legs and his gun kept cracking. Then he threw himself flat and Heavy's horse jumped high and wide to clear him.

Heavy was thrown sideways from his saddle and into the brush. The brush broke his fall and he lay there, wounded and shaken but fighting mad and half drunk and desperate, his gun spewing fire.

Shorty was on his feet, spitting dirt, blinking his slitted eyes. He saw Sauers shooting at Clyde and saw the gun drop from Clyde's hand. And it was then that Shorty Stroud turned his back on Heavy's gun, and his bullet whirled big Mart Sauers around.

Then fear gripped the big Anchor ramrod, and he was sobbing and whining and almost screaming with terror as the .45 slugs from Shorty Stroud's six-shooter cut his legs from under him.

"I've throwed my gun away!" Sauers bawled. "Don't shoot me no more!" And his six-shooter sailed wildly through the air.

Shorty grinned flatly and turned his gun on Heavy, whose crouched, bulky frame was partly hidden by the brush. Heavy fired at Shorty and the bullet clipped the little cowhand's left

ear. Then the six-shooter in Shorty Stroud's hand belched flame and the heavy slug hit Heavy just above the bridge of the nose and tore part of his skull away where it mushroomed out.

Sauers had pulled a sneak gun. Clyde O'Grady, stunned and knocked out by a bullet that had drilled his hat and grazed his skull, shook his head to clear it of dizzy pain. He saw the blurred outline of Mart Sauers on the ground not twenty feet away—saw the gun in the Anchor ramrod's hand.

Clyde O'Grady didn't know how his own six-shooter had gotten into the grip of his right hand. But it was there, and his eyes cleared of the red film that had half-blinded him. He saw the ugly face of Martin Sauers, and it was the face of the man who had killed Tom O'Grady from the brush. . . . The man who had sent Tom O'Grady's son Clyde to the Yuma pen to die. . . .

Clyde O'Grady's first shot tore the sneak gun from Mart Sauers' hand. His second shot struck the Anchor ramrod's face. And he kept on shooting until the gun in his hand was empty.

He heard a lot of shooting; saw men on [illegible]k. Shorty's grinning face appeared [illegible] him. Then the cabin door flung wide open and Sheriff Bill Kirwin was standing there with a six-shooter in one hand and a jug in the other. That was Cap Riling and a bunch of greasy-sack cowmen riding up. And the renegades Sauers had hired, those who still had enough life in their bullet-ripped carcasses to holler, were yelling quits and throwing away their guns. The shooting was over.

A HORSE slid to a halt alongside Shorty Stroud. A small rider flung herself from the saddle and landed on her feet alongside Shorty. He straightened up and grabbed Kay Kirwin in both arms.

"Cap," she panted, "thought he could talk me into staying home. He don't know Bill Kirwin's Brat. . . . Listen, I'm gunning for a big tinhorn sport who thinks he's a ladies' man. He tried to paw me."

"His name is Heavy," said Shorty Stroud. "He won't paw you no more. Fer gosh sakes, I just kissed you. Didn't you even know it? You stand there blattin' about some other feller—"

"Oh! Gee whiz, Shorty! You're all bloody! You're hurt!"

"It's nothin'," Shorty held her tight, "that a few years of lovin' care won't cure. . . . We kin hire a cook—"

"Or live with Clyde and Martha. Oh! Poor Martha! She's somewhere along the trail. The only thing I could get her to ride was a pensioned-off, biscuit-eater pack mule. But she was bound to trail along. Said she'd even ride to get to the Ladder ranch. To tell Clyde O'Grady she'd been a prideful, stubborn little hussy. Where'd Clyde get to?"

Clyde O'Grady had been the first to sight the girl on the long-eared, patient roan mule. He ran on unsteady legs to meet her—lifted her as she swung lamely from the saddle. They stood there in the first gray light of dawn, the setting lopsided moon behind them, holding one another, wordless, neither of them able to voice so much as a word of the many things they had to tell each other.

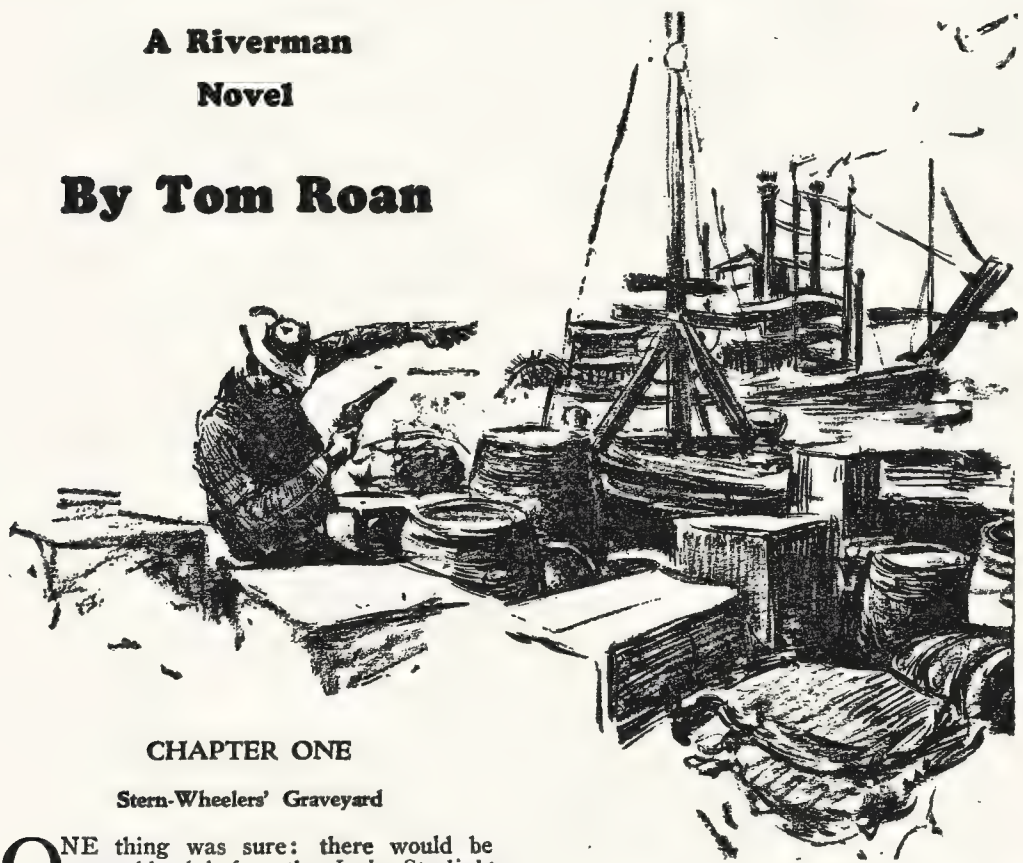
THE END

HEAD NORTH TO

Piled up on the knife-edged Missouri shoals, the crew of Swede Rolston's mail packet *Lady Starlight* found that a rival steamboat master and a hell's-brew of river renegades were waiting there —to make certain that, for once, the mail would *not* go through!

A Riverman Novel

By Tom Roan



CHAPTER ONE

Stern-Wheelers' Graveyard

ONE thing was sure: there would be more blood before the *Lady Starlight* steamed into the mouth of the muddy Yellowstone. The thought brought a slight glint to Swede Rolston's pale eyes. It was not very comforting, that Sunday morning in the 70's as he leaned against the high and prettied starboard rail of the passenger deck, in a fur-lined black coat and a tall brown beaver pulled low on his ears. Saint Joseph, along with other things, always irked him.

As the first boat upriver-bound, they would probably see many more useless hours of delay, then more trouble with smart-alecks, drunks, dangerous women, and all the barrel-scrapings of the frontier swaggering and bellowing aboard. Trouble sought a man out these days. It was in the air he breathed.

This morning even the weather was infernal-mean. A rousing wind was whistling in from the north, itself as cold as the islands of ice still coming down the Missouri and out of the far-flung Indian Country. It groaned along the grimy wharves thrust out into the water from the east bank, where bales and boxes of cargo stood in piles and stacks.

Some of that cargo had been there for a long time, lying over and waiting for shipment since the last steamer had gone upriver in the fall. Many of the great sheets of heavy

WILDERNESS HELL!

Beauty Darling's old shotgun roared, tearing the life out of the killer. . . .

canvas covering them were still frozen from the sleet and the snow of the long winter that was just blowing the last of itself out, to make way for warmer winds and suns.

Even that would not be enough to make a man forget some things.

Swede Rolston had killed a woman not so many nights ago. He had not actually knifed or shot or clubbed her, but it was all the same to his troubled mind just now. Her pale face and white hands, clutching at her throat, kept coming back to him. He saw her eyes, so wide, so blue and so full of terror and sorrow, and then the wet little bundle they had dragged out of the river, near frozen and battered to death by the *Lady Starlight's* great red stern-wheel before they could shut her pounding engines down.

The start of it had been nothing to trouble a river gambler for very long. One saw such things almost every trip up or down the Missouri: a tall, high-aired cheap crook caught red-handed trying to play the sharper—a dissipated fool who should have had sense enough to lay down his cards and leave the game when quietly told to go, instead of bucking back in his chair, screeching like a panther, and sawing for his guns. It was a trick he should have known better than to pull with Swede Rolston.

It had happened at twilight twenty miles out of Saint Louis as the *Lady Starlight* made her grand sweep off the Mississippi and into the Missouri. The game in the gentlemen's salon under the pilot house was less than an hour old before the chairs crashed, the table teetered, the poker chips clattering and spilling, and the deadly thunder of a six-shooter filled the upper deck.

One Asa Woodbine had died swiftly across the broken chair, the wild blue light in his eyes slow-changing to a glassy sheen. The crowds had come, of course, rushing, clawing and pushing to look in. Into one portside window had come Anna Woodbine, looking like a glorious little pale-haired lady in a picture; a lady in a dinky red-velvet hat with a tall blue plume, her bosom high and white in a blue velvet gown. Then she had gasped, had gone pale and staring. Until she screamed, Swede Rolston had not known that the man he had just killed had a sister aboard.

Many blamed the rest of it on the staring, pop-eyed crowd out there in the runway. Somebody, it had been argued, could have turned and caught the pretty young thing as she wheeled with another scream to throw herself over the rail and down into the icy water below. No one had lifted so much as a finger to stop her, hang them!

Old Bent McClung, for seven years now Swede Rolston's trusted captain of the *Lady Starlight,* and Mr. Beauty Darling, the mate, had charge of the situation this morning. Attended by a little group of the respectables on the passenger list, they were burying the woman's and her brother's bodies in the best cemetery and in the best coffins Swede Rolston's money could buy in all Saint Joe.

Without the woman, they could have kicked Asa Woodbine's carcass in the river for the fish, as far as Swede Rolston cared!

The long, mournful wail of a whistle down the river took his mind off all of it for the moment. A steamboat was rounding the bend with two racing dark ruffles of smoke pouring from her tall stacks and bannering briskly away in the wind. Rolston recognized her im-

mediately. It was the *Blanche Dulanty*, out of New Orleans and upriver bound for Fort Benton. And that meant still more trouble. . . .

MR. BEAUTY DARLING, hunk in his jaw and squirting tobacco juice as always, came aboard as the other stern-wheeler was nosing her way into the wharf just behind the *Lady Starlight*.

Not by the wildest stretch of the imagination would even a blind man have called Mr. Darling beautiful. He was past his middle forties, a squat, short-necked bull of a man. His head was bullet-shaped, the coarse black hair growing so far down on his sloping forehead it came within an ace of connecting with his protruding bush of eyebrows. The jaw was wide and undershot, the eyes steely and round, like those of a tomcat used to getting about in the dark places, and his entire face looked as if it had been fashioned for its owner to fight bulldogs on all-fours.

He nodded to Swede and spat in the runway. "'Scuse me." He yanked out his blue-spotted handkerchief and bent quickly to wipe the smear from the deck. "I forget now an' then. Just can't he'p it. Like a fella lyin' in bed achawin' in his sleep an' spittin' agin' the wall or in somebody's ear."

Rolston did not answer him. He was looking along the rail, eyes on the crowded *Blanche Dulanty* as she strained in against the current and the groaning piles of her wharf. Mobs jammed the fancy-scrolled rails of her first-class passenger deck. A score stood on the Texas, the open top-deck behind the pilot house and the officers' cabins.

Below on the cargo deck, it was the same. The passengers down there were of the rough-and-ready sort, dangerous with knife or gun, club or fist.

It was prettier but no less dangerous among the most of the plug-hatted "swells" and their women on the passenger deck. Many of them —"gentlemen of chance" and "ladies of the packets"—were of the kind who followed the boats as a profession. While the women sang and danced and fleeced their suckers, the con men and the card sharps could play their games from New Orleans to the end of the run, and then—never leaving the boat—come back downriver without a break in the gleanings in either direction.

As the owner of the *Lady Starlight*, having won her one morning before breakfast on a single toss of the dice, Swede Rolston had lost favor in all the dives along the river for his incessant attempt to keep the games on the level aboard his boat. He was a master at the manipulation of cards, at the flinging of the dice, and the spinning of the wheels, but he reserved his tricks for those who came to him with tricks of their own.

He could see Captain Booger Malone in the pilot house of the *Blanche Dulanty*. For a moment their eyes met, and then Malone shrugged his beefy shoulders and was looking away as the last line below was made fast. Rolston turned, a little quirk gathering about the corners of his mouth as he looked northward into the dangerous country.

The wind bit into his face. He felt a few needles of sleet strike. The land ahead lay plain on plain, benchland and mountain rising beyond benchland and mountain. Dangerous water was ahead. Men spoke of the Missouri these days as the steamboat graveyard. One could never tell much about the weather at this time of the year; there might yet be a sudden blizzard to come swooping down off the high passes. Or a stampeding herd of buffalo could play fiddle-sticks with such a thing as a steamboat.

Then there were the redskins, sullen over their wrongs, the broken promises of the pale-faces, the ducking and political side-stepping of one Great White Father after another.

Of late the Indian was beginning to strike his return blows, harder and harder, with the memory of his dead and wronged a dark cloud on his brow. They were up there,
ows constantly on the stir in those hills .
on those plains, lords of murder everywhere, the dripping red hand ready to strike, to let the tomahawk swing its bloody stroke, to send the good lance flying.

An alarming number of those reds had guns these days, many of them better than any honest settler could even dream of owning. There were whites who would not stop anywhere. If they could not steal a man's gold in the dark, then they might sell an Indian a rifle with which to kill his neighbor from afar and at a moment when the poor devil least expected trouble from any source.

WITH the gangplank hastily thrust out, the passengers from the *Blanche Dulanty* were pouring ashore, some heading straight for the honkytonks facing the river, others turning up the slope. It was this way at every landing, the swells going uptown in carriages, noses in the air, the roughs all howl and yell as they stampeded for the waiting harpies and crimps nearer at hand.

Swede Rolston's eyes now were on a tall man of fifty in gray who had not waited for the rowdies—always first in the rush—to clear the way. Instead, he had come pawing and raking into them, brushing some ruthlessly aside and cracking one loud-mouthed yokel over the skull with his gold-headed cane. Now, long coattails flapping, tall hat high on his head, dark curls and waxed little mustache and goatee shining, he was heading straight for the *Lady Starlight*.

"Somebody," intoned Rolston, "seems to have pointed me out to him for some reason, Mr. Darling. He looks like a hot potato on a cold day."

"Yam, you mean." Beauty Darling spat over the rail this time. "Nose an' them pink cheeks looks like he's quite a drinkin' man. Who're the two fellas followin'? Bodyguards?"

"You never can tell on the river."

"Though most generally," Beauty Darling grinned, "I know what to do with 'em. I'll be on the Texas, just in case. I don't like the looks of a damn' man in the bunch."

He was gone with that, and Swede Rolston stood waiting. The tall man's steps below were straight, long and precise. He hit the gangplank with the same long-swinging stride. Rolston heard little Priddy Sprewitt, the purser, say something. The tall one must have brushed past him, the two men following him now slowing down and coming to a halt at the other side of a pile of boxed cargo—two men who knew what they were to do. The tall one came right on up.

"Good morning!" He smiled. "You're Rolston—Captain Swede Rolston, I take it, sir?"

"Along with worse," Rolston's eyes filled with amused little lights, "I'm sometimes called that, but my captaincy ended with the close of the war."

"I'm Major Oliver Kensington." He did not offer his hand. "Cavalry during the war. Fifth Ohio Valley Volunteers."

"And I was with Jackson." Rolston's eyes narrowed ever so slightly. "Captain of cavalry. What can I do for you?"

"Answer a few rather—er—personal questions." Kensington took a leather case from an inside pocket. "I suppose they'll sound personal. I heard about your little trouble aboard this boat just above Saint Louis. We picked up the tale on the Missouri, at Long House Landing. I was traveling hard and fast to overtake them. Missed them by only a couple of hours at Hawke's Mill, just below Saint Louis. It was there, I was informed, that Asa Woodbine and the woman with him came aboard your boat?"

"With several others." Rolston nodded, wondering what was next. "I was busy that evening and didn't see the passengers coming aboard."

"This is the woman, I believe?" Kensington flipped open his leather case, and the tinted likeness of the woman Rolston had known as Anna Woodbine stared at him.

His voice was low and flat as he answered, "What's all this to you, Major Kensington?"

"My wife, that's all!" Kensington bared his teeth. "I trailed her by stage and horseback all the way to Hawke's Mill. Running off with that damned thing!" He crushed the folder now in his hands. "With twenty thousand dollars of my money! He lost it on your boat, I'm told?"

"Well?"

"And I'm damned glad you killed him!" Kensington's face was so red now it looked as if he were about to explode. "Of course I wanted the right for myself. His and her death naturally saved me from soiling my hands with their infernal blood. But it's what one might expect for marrying beneath his station. She was nothing but pretty damned white trash." He stomped the deck. "Damn her, I would have cut her throat—*uhh!*"

Swede Rolston hit him, lifting him, carrying him upward off his fine-booted feet and down on the back of his neck on the deck with his heels in the air. As he went down, he whipped over on his side and yelled to the men below:

"Kill him!"

And then the gun roared, a heavy, blooming-out noise that went all up and down the waterfront. A man just bringing up a six-shooter behind one of the big packing cases below was suddenly staggering back and flapping forward at the middle as the second man down there dropped to the ground and out of sight. The first one fell dead, skidding forward on his face with a charge of buckshot in his belly.

Above Swede Rolston's head, having just stepped out of the pilot house, was Mr. Beauty Darling, calmly chewing. In his hands, the right-hand steel tube hot, smoke purling around the muzzle, was the shotgun that had downed the bodyguard below. The hammer for the left-hand barrel was cocked. Beauty Darling spat in the wind, and changed sides with his chaw while he waited for just one more little move down there so that he could blow the belly out of the second guard.

CHAPTER TWO

Marked Men

FRITZ HOGGWALL, mate of the *Blanche Dulanty*, saw the shooting from the pilot house after Booger Malone had gone below. Hoggwall was big and blond, the kinky hair growing to a low V on his forehead above a pair of eyes so cold and blue they might have been ground from frosty china.

The stern of the *Lady Starlight* was not more than eighty yards ahead, and she was lying just right. The shot would be an easy one. That thought ripped through Mr. Fritz Hoggwall's brain as he reached for a rifle hanging in one of the gun racks above the big steering wheel.

To bring down Beauty Darling for shooting

a professional killer on the wharf was the farthest thing from Fritz Hoggwall's thoughts. He had wanted to kill Beauty Darling for a long time. This was only an excuse. He whipped the rifle down, looked at the charge, and cocked it. He was just swinging it to his shoulder when Booger Malone stepped back into the pilot house and grabbed his arm.

"You're a damned fool, Fritz!" he snorted. "What in hell are you about to do, get us blown out of the water? I've told you a thousand times that you're not back at sea on some infernal old full-rigged sailing vessel where you can kill as you please!"

"Beauty Darling's killed another man!" Hoggwall's breath had quickened with excitement, the words coming out of him as though rushed by strong pressure behind him. "Look! There on the dock, just behind that pile of cargo!"

"I saw him fall." Malone's voice was quiet. "When Beauty shoots they usually fall. I've seen him handle a gun before. You'll come below with me and try to keep this thing from turning into a general fight. It'll be hell if it goes that far. You know very well that the law in Saint Joe is anything but on our side, and this thing might get into a mess that would keep us tied up here to the wharf for days. We have a schedule to keep, and we don't have the mail contract any more to fall back on, thanks to Swede Rolston for beating us out on it last fall."

He tightened his hand on Hoggwall's arm. "Put up that gun! Beauty Darling's no ordinary yokel you can just shoot and forget about. You might miss, and Beauty doesn't. If he let go with that old ten-gauge he'd just about blow half the pilot house off—and you with it, you thick-headed damned fool!"

"I wouldn't miss 'im from here." The mate's voice was thick and sullen. "One squeeze of the trigger, and down he'd go. You know damned well you'd like to see him die!"

"I want to be sure of it." Malone took off his cap. With a swipe of a big palm he wiped away the quick balls of cold perspiration that had gathered on his brow. "Put that gun up before he sees you!"

Hoggwall lowered the hammer and reluctantly returned the rifle to its rack. Just as reluctantly, big feet dragging, he followed below.

MAJOR OLIVER KENSINGTON was already leaving the *Lady Starlight*. His fine hat was smashed, his nose and mouth streaming blood. He still held to his fine cane, and in a few moments he was whipping it into action with surprising results.

He had taken just one glance at the dead man behind the packing cases. The second man was still lying there, hugging the ground and the sides of the boxes like a sick cat flattened out against the warm stones of a chimney corner.

No one except the victim himself knew what Major Kensington said, but it brought his burly gunman off the ground like a bull getting up to fight. The heavy end of the gold-headed cane hit him across the back of the neck, knocking him down again. Then the cane kept rising and falling in a fury that made women on the passenger deck of the *Blanche Dulanty* let out little yips of terror and hide their faces behind their hands.

No one in his right mind would have beaten the most bull-headed horse, mule or an ox like that without intending to kill it. The gunman was down and up, yelling and cursing like a maniac. He made several trys to get a six-shooter from his waistband.

Kensington seemed to see every move a second before his victim tried to execute it. The cane was always there a jump ahead. He beat his victim's hands and arms down, whipping like some tight-lipped machine, not saying another word, just standing there beating, thrusting and sometimes prodding with the skill of a master-swordsman. He struck several more blows after his victim was down for the last time and unconscious on the ground. Then he stopped, put a handkerchief to his face, and turned back toward the *Blanche Dulanty* with the same sure, long-swinging stride.

"We'd better watch 'im." Booger Malone whispered the warning as he worked his way out of the crowd to the edge of a cleared space on the north side of the wharf. "That man's dangerous, Fritz."

"He is." Hoggwall nodded, mouth slacked open, blue eyes staring. "I told you so a long time ago. I wish he had stayed where he belongs, damn 'im."

"Would have stayed," Malone let the words slip from the side of his mouth, "if it hadn't been for his pretty woman. But he's usually quiet and smooth as oil unless he just has to break loose and fight."

"Yes, I know." Hoggwall rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully. "But I wonder what he said to Swede Rolston to make Swede hit 'im?"

"I wouldn't know." Malone shrugged. "I only know that Rolston has an enemy this time he'll never beat out. Swede's on his list now. He'll die like a dog before he can bring his boat back down this river. He's marked and double-marked for it right now."

"And," Fritz Hoggwall's wide mouth stretched into a grin, "won't you be sorry for that!"

"Very sorry!" Malone gritted his strong, square teeth. "That's a pleasure I've always hoped for myself. Steady now." He had glanced up the slope. "This looks like more

trouble in the wind. Here comes old Bent McClung with a gang at his heels. *Damn that whistle!"*

Up there in the pilot house Mr. Beauty Darling, seeing the captain coming, was sawing down on the cord above the wheel. That sound, known from Fort Benton to New Orleans, was the all-commanding roll of the *Lady Starlight's* whistle, to tell everybody far and near that she was ready to cast her lines and head on into the Indian Country.

SWEDE ROLSTON left the rail when he saw Captain Bent McClung coming. He went to his big cabin under the pilot house, took off his coat and wrap and flung himself into an easy chair. Old Blackie, his tomcat, came out of a corner and perched himself on his shoulder.

Beauty Darling's coming had told him without having to ask about it that the funeral was set with himself he would have noticed that something was wrong. Old Bent McClung was not very good at hiding things. Rolston seemed to jar him out of something when he spoke, "How was the preacher?"

"Preacher?" McClung had to blink a few times before he could answer. "Why—why he wasn't much to speak of, Swede. Nope, nothing, I reckon, his own mother could have bragged about. He just skinned through, you might say, on plain ignorance and brassy cussedness."

"But the rest of it was all right?"

"Why—why, yes, I guess so." McClung was inclined to squirm by this time. "They looked right nice, the coffins, I mean."

"But," Rolston was watching him now, "what was wrong with the preacher?"

"Oh, that!" McClung bent and poked himself into a chair, letting his blue cap drop on the floor. "Well, maybe I'd better tell it

WASTE PAPER IS A WEAPON OF WAR

Twenty-five tons of blueprint paper go into the making of a battleship. Paper is needed for packing food, ammunition and medical supplies for the armed forces—and the shortage is acute. Don't burn or throw away newspapers, magazines, wrapping paper, cartons. . . .

SAVE IT . . . SORT IT . . . CALL YOUR COLLECTOR

over. There were men and women behind McClung who had gone to the funeral home and on to the graveyard with the bodies. The blowing of the whistle would bring the rest of them, the better class first, then the rowdies trailing down, each with a bundle or a jug under his arm, the more wealthy with kegs in sacks.

It was a relief when the last whistle blew. A minute later engine-room bells were ringing below and a slow, pleasant vibration started stealing over the *Lady Starlight,* gently quivering her from end to end. The wheel creaked in the pilot house. Old Blackie started to purr contentedly on Rolston's shoulder. Even Blackie knew the *Lady Starlight* was once more on the move, backing out into midstream. Captain McClung tapped on the door and came in after the boat had squared away and was heading up the river.

" 'Pon my soul, sir," his Mississippi drawl came out like something lazily stretching as he rubbed his hands briskly and smiled, "we got away from the wharf with nothing more than a couple of broken noses and one fellow being hit over the head with a rock. Much better than I hoped for! Beauty told me you had a mite of trouble."

He laughed, but there was a lack of sincerity to it. If Swede Rolston had not been so upstraight. *I* had to preach the funeral and lead them in the prayers and the singing. That's a fact! Others had Sunday morning services and wouldn't break 'em. I had to be whole hog or have none. I got up there, shutting both eyes and letting her rip. Throat's kind of dry from so damned much hollering." He plucked at his collar. "Well, can't you offer me about six fingers of whisky and a glass of water?"

"Help yourself," Rolston nodded to the big sideboard to his right. "But something else is bothering you, Bent. What is it?"

McClung shrugged, squared himself and set his jaw. "All right. God knows, Swede, I hate to tell you, but the news came through as I was on my way back from the funeral, and I can't keep it from you. The reds have made another big wipe-out."

"Where?" Rolston jerked forward in his chair, all attention now.

"Black Angel Bend, four mornings ago." Bent McClung's old voice was like hammer-blows straight to the heart. "An army scout read the tale in what he saw when he came through. Out of the whole settlement there was not a man, not a woman or a child left alive. I'm sorry I had to be the one to have to tell you. I knew how you felt about—about a certain girl there."

"But—it can't be true!" Rolston was sud-

denly on his feet, face white, eyes wild. "It's a lie! It's a damned lie!"

"It ain't, Swede." McClung was staring into his glass. "I tried to come up to it on the easy side to tell you. It's true and you must know it's true. You know the scout who brought it through, and you trust him. The man who came through with the tale was Buffalo Bill Cody. He counted what was left of one hundred and fifty-nine people, and he was sure he saw your little red-headed friend's body, lying across a broken rifle in front of her log school-house on the bluff."

CHAPTER THREE

Death Stalks the Lady Starlight

HE SAT like a bull hit between the eyes when Captain McClung, still turning his cap on his hands, arose and eased out.

McClung's words had bitten all the way to the marrow. Black Angel Bend had not been out of his thoughts since the afternoon he had left last fall. Lynn Larsen was always in the picture, and the last one of her was of her standing there on the high, dark bluff with the north wind in her yellow hair and the first of the coming big snows flaking the air around her, her bit of laced handkerchief a white flutter as the *Lady Starlight* swept downriver and around the bend.

In the cabin here, stored in pretty boxes and packages, were the many things he had bought for her in New Orleans. Lynn's sister, returning by train and stage from a girl's seminary in Virginia, would have taken over the little log school-house, and this trip, on the outbound, Swede Rolston would have married Lynn.

"Hit 'im hard, didn't it?" Beauty Darling asked in the pilot house as he watched the river ahead from behind the man at the big wheel. "Musta been tough on 'im."

" 'Pon my word, he never batted an eye," McClung lied. "Took it standing straight up. He's hard, Darling."

"He's made o' steel," Darling admitted. "Cold, cold steel, the kind they used to hammer into good swords, as my gran'pa would say."

The captain glanced out the open doorway to his left. Mr. Priddy Sprewitt, the purser, was appearing from below. Behind him trailed a big, ox-like figure with a crushed-in hat and recently torn and muddied clothing. Soap and hot water and a clean towel had taken most of the smears of blood off him.

At a glance the fellow behind Mr. Sprewitt looked all lumps and bumps. His large nose seemed knocked out of line and sadly split, balled and rolled over to the left. It was swollen from a mean blow across the bridge that had left his eyes so puffed and black they were like a couple of burned biscuits. Some teeth had been knocked out, leaving his lips purple and thick. Sprewitt opened his mouth to say something when they stopped just outside the doorway, but the larger man sullenly pushed him aside.

"I can talk for myself," he rumbled. "I'm Hooker Davenport. I slipped aboard with the crowd just before you shoved off. This tongue-tied wart," he turned his swollen eyes on Mr. Sprewitt for an instant, "caught sight of me somehow. All he can squawk about is passage money. I'll pay or you squirts will make me swim, he says. Damn that! I want to see Swede Rolston. It's important."

"It's sorter comin' back to me," Beauty Darling had moved closer, "that you wanted to see 'im over a gun-barrel not long ago. You an' another fella—"

"Was down there behind some cargo, yeah!" Davenport cut him short with a grimace that was a swollen attempt for a leer. "You killed Link Butler, my pardner, with your shotgun. I know you, all right. You saw me get nearly beat to death with that big walkin' stick with a lump of gold the si-- your fist on the head of it! Well," shrugged, painfully, "I was man enough to take it an' live through it, but I ain't the sort to swallow that kind of a thing lyin' down like a drunken snipe in a gutter. I'm gettin' even, by Gawd!"

"That's making it clear, Mr. Davenport." McClung put out his arms and spread his feet, keeping Beauty Darling back. "Who do you intend to get even with? I had nothing to do with it—"

"Didn't say you did!" Davenport seemed to be getting meaner by the second. "An' I'm not blamin' that duck." He glowered at Darling. "If he hadn't shot Link Butler, then Link woulda killed Swede Rolston. But the duck I want to get even with is Oliver Kensington. Him, Booger Malone an' Fritz Hoggwall.

"But," he shrugged, and the pain of that seemed to make him madder, "I ain't here to talk to the small fry. Swede Rolston's the man I want to see. He's the butter in the churn. You clucks are only the whey to pitch to the hogs or throw in the bushes. The only real thing Darling's got to brag about is his looks. Hell, he's so ugly he'd scare ha'nts out of a graveyard! He's got a mouth an' face like a catfish, just like a catfish, I swear! If an alligator et 'im it'd crawl off an' die of hydrophobia of the belly. If—"

"Let me outa here!" Darling was beginning to buck and surge like a mean mule in a stable, but McClung filled the doorway, his hands and widespread feet braced against the jambs. "I want to get right up in his whiskers an' whis-

tle 'im a little tune! There's still a few places left to put lumps on 'im!"

"Hold it!" McClung relaxed one foot long enough to kick backward and catch him on the shin. "Hold it, Mr. Darling! Be yourself, sir! Give this man a chance to have his say. After all, you're not very pretty, Mr. Darling."

"Damn Mr. Darling!" Davenport slung his hands wildly. "You're wastin' time! You've got women an' children aboard this old tub of a boat. They're right now ridin' on death. Death, I tell you. Swede Rolston's goin' to die. You'll die, that ugly gorilla behind you will die. I've got something to tell Swede Rolston. Hell, I don't want to shoot 'im or cut his throat! I'm goin' to spill my guts. I'll save this boat, I'll save them women an' children. Damn it, get me to Rolston, I tell you!" He was beginning to yell. *"Rolston!* I want to warn him in time. Warn 'im, I tell you! Man, oh, man, if you only knew you was floatin' on hell ready to bust loose an' fly right up in your fa—"

Only Priddy Sprewitt was able to catch his last words. Priddy Sprewitt caught them be- [illegible] did the best he could to catch Hooker [illegible] in his arms as he was falling dead [illegible] his feet, with the thunder of a sudden shot rolling from the direction of the stern.

ROLSTON was there before the smell of the smoke could die away. At once Beauty Darling and Priddy Sprewitt were sent to the head of the companionway to keep the crowds back. People left alone in times such as this were like so many sheep. They would crowd on up and up, popping eyes staring, until they overran everything. You had to handle them like cattle, and Darling was there to do it when Sprewitt's lisping pleas failed to stop them.

The killer had fled the instant the shot was fired, but it was easy to see how he had done it. He had stolen up over the wooden housing, curved halfway back over the forward part of the wheel to keep the spray from the red paddles from flying on up and to the Texas. Iron rungs had let the man come up and go down. It had taken no time at all, and he could have come from the passenger or the cargo deck. The latter seemed the most likely. Somebody on the passenger deck might have seen him. Below, he had the great bales and boxes of cargo to hide behind until he came to the engine room to slip along down the narrow runway.

"And now he's back where he started from," Rolston said as they halted there above the wheel. "No use looking for him. Go over what Davenport said again, and make it slower this time."

McClung went over it again. Rolston listened, frowning now and then. Anger, it was clear, had been Hooker Davenport's undoing. He had had something to tell, but his fury had robbed him of his chance. There was no question about his wanting revenge, but, like most of his kind, he had been angling for a reward at the same time.

"The part that hit me the hardest," the captain explained, "was where he said something about floating on hell ready to bust loose and explode or fly right up in your face. It sort of made me wince inside. I right away thought of the forty barrels of gunpowder down there just ahead of the boiler room."

"Take a look at it!" Rolston snapped his fingers. "Right away! We may want to shift it."

"Shift it—to where?" McClung opened his hands helplessly. " 'Pon my word, we're so piled high with cargo down there now— Well, I thought I might be able to take on a while more in Saint Joe, but there was no room for anything else."

"If we wanted to shift it," Rolston said, "we could stand it out along the gun'els, examining each barrel as it was shifted. We can put a guard night and day over it and let no one even walk near it. If anything happened it could go overboard and into the river. There's enough of it down there to blow us to kingdom come."

"But it's in a room all to itself now!" the captain argued. "All under a strong lock and key. If Indians hit us, we've got to think of flaming arrows—"

"And damned fast kicking!" Rolston's tone was getting mean. "It's in a room now, as you say. But look here. It's possible for a man who knows boats to find a way down into the hold. Once down there he could get under the powder room. With a good auger he could bore holes up through the planking—"

"Good God!" Bent McClung stamped the deck so hard it left his right foot lame for the rest of the day. " 'Pon my word, Swede, I'll be damned if I ever once thought of that! Mr. Darling! *Mr. Darling!* Come here and listen to me!"

THE search for the killer went on. It was slow and quiet. Very few of the people aboard knew that such a search was going on. Rolston had friends among those rowdies on the cargo deck—buffalo hunters, Indian scouts, plainsmen and just ordinary white trash. He had friends among the "swells" also, and many eyes were watching now.

They kept it quiet when Beauty Darling made his discovery about twenty minutes after going below. Somebody had been in the grimy old hold below the powder barrels. A disastrous thing was being prepared aboard the *Lady Starlight.*

"I think we're a jump ahead of dirty work," the mate explained to Rolston in his cabin. "Somebody's been down there, an' I hope to be able to catch 'im goin' back. I went down in the engine room an' come back the same way so nobody would know. There's a sack of tools right under the powder an' somebody's been at work cuttin' a hole with a small auger and a couple of little saws no wider'n your pen-knife. Whoever it is, he aims to blow us clear off the river. All I want is my left hand in his hair an' a good blade in my right an' wropped 'round his throat. One wipe an' I'll fetch you the begger's head quicker'n a trigger."

"Go easy," Rolston warned sternly. "There is a bigger gun behind the one that killed Davenport. When you catch your man take good care of him. You can make a live one talk, but there's not much you can do with a corpse."

Darling stomped out. He was back at two o'clock in the morning, just as they were entering the Devil's Rapids, one of the steamboat graveyards of the Missouri. He came not merely with a head but a whole man intact. He was a dried-up, sucker-mouthed fellow with enormous hands and feet and little pink eyes that reminded one of the albino eyes in a white rat's face. Old hat in hand, he was bobbing and jerking his short-clipped yellow head, big teeth gleaming in the lamplight. Beauty Darling had his left hand gripped in the back of the man's collar and the point of a wicked Texas knife poked firmly against his spine.

"You tell 'im now, honey baby," urged Darling, putting a little more pressure on the buckhorned hilt of his ten-inch blade. "You say your name's Pinky Yawley. It's right purty. Too purty to be carryin' down in a messy old hold. Be nice an' tell us what you aimed to do down there with your little saws an' auger or I'm apt to lose my gentle disposition an' start carvin' your kidneys out!"

"Worst I've seen yet." Yawley, instead of looking scared, grinned at Rolston as he jabbed a thumb back at Darling. "An' I thought I'd seen 'em all when drunk. Yuh musta caught it in a tree or twisted it outa a hollow log. I was in the hold, all right. Been doin' the most of my hidin' down there because I ain't got no money to pay my fare. I slipped aboard the night yuh landed in Saint Louis. Didn't have a dime then, ain't got one now. All I want is to get to the Musselshell Country, an' maybe some day I can pay yuh back?"

"So that's your story?" Rolston was watching him closely. "Where have you been getting food to keep you from starving?"

"I'm little an' I'm light." Yawley's grin widened. "I get about fast in the dark. I see good in the dark, too. I've been stealin' what I need from yore kitchen on the first-class deck. It's better eatin' up there than the stuff yuh get below."

"Nothing but the best, eh?"

"What's the difference?" Yawley opened his hands innocently. "Yuh suffer no worse from gettin' caught stealin' the best hoss than yuh do stealin' the sorry old rack of bones. Fact is, yuh suffer less. Judges an' juries allus seem a little kinder to the big thief than the little squirt. My daddy got ten years in the pen for stealin' a ten-dollar mule. My Uncle Jarvey got only two for robbin' a bank an' shootin' a man on the getaway. What'n hell are yuh gonna do with me? The river's too damn' cold to swim."

"You'll maybe float good." Darling was beginning to look as if something was being put over him, and he was not the kind to like it. "Bodies do in three days, they say."

Yawley's grin disappeared. "I don't know nothin' about the tools down there that he's been talkin' about, Mr. Rolston. No, sir, I don't! My blanket an' quilt's spread up under the boilers where it's warmer an' dryer. There's maybe a couple or three of them [illegible] yuh call bulkheads 'twix me an' the [illegible] flunky fella's been cussin' about. He's wastin time with me when he oughta be lookin' for somebody else . . . Gawd, what was that!"

A roar had shaken the boat, staggering it as if from a mighty blow driven straight upward from the bottom of the river. Women awoke screaming in their berths on the passenger deck. Men yelled, bawled like stampeding bulls, the feet pounding in all directions.

Down in the engine room there was a frantic *clang! clang!* of the bells. An acrid smoke boiled up from the cargo deck. Faster and far more dangerous than the smoke came the sudden hot clouds of escaping steam from the *Lady Starlight's* boiler room.

"Fire!" A voice somewhere roared out that one dreadful word, making the screaming of the women rise louder and louder until it was a wailing bedlam. Another strong voice took it up. In an instant it seemed to be lifting from a dozen brawny chests and straining throats. *"Fire!" "Fire!" "Fire!"*

CHAPTER FOUR

Beached

WITH the front end of a boiler blown out and a steam pipe to the engine room broken, and the scalding spray of steam going everywhere, the *Lady Starlight* lost headway against the strong current she was bucking in the pale moon and starshine, and started drifting almost at once.

Rolston came out of his chair as though somebody had fired a gun under him. He barked an order for Beauty Darling to take his prisoner to the pilot house and leave him under guard, and then he was rushing out into the pawing and lunging crowds on the passenger deck, to fight his way below.

Captain McClung had gone racing to the pilot house with his boots in his hand. A true riverman first, last and always thought of his boat. By saving it he saved his passengers and his cargo and his reputation as a master at the same time. One had to stay afloat in the Devil's Rapids or simply give up the ghost. Too many good boats had gone down here, the swift water tearing them to pieces after they had struck on the jagged rocks jutting up from the river's bed like so many sharp-toothed saws.

Down there on the cargo deck it was sheer confusion, about the worst run of it Swede Rolston had seen on any boat. The dust was suffocating and thicker than a wall. Steam still roared from the boiler room where the remains of a fireman lay against the piles of cordwood stacked in one of the bins. People sawed and mauled, the oaths rising, a fist or the barrel of a revolver slapping and settling the rush here and there.

No one could tell just yet what the damage had been. Later it was learned that an explosive charge of some kind had gone into the roaring firebox of the wrecked boiler in a stick of wood thrust in by the unsuspecting fireman who had been killed. The blast had been intended as only a starter, something to stop the boat, to make her suddenly helpless right in the middle of the Devil's Rapids and throw everybody aboard into near-insane confusion.

One thing was safe, the thing that had loomed larger and larger in Swede Rolston's plans. It was the "strong box" just forward of where the barrels of powder were stored. It was a room ten feet wide and twenty long, a cell in which to hold the devil and seven angels. Its walls were of the hardest-seasoned white oak, thick enough to turn a cannon ball, and bound and re-bound with steel. Only a charge of dynamite could shake its mighty door. Government agents inspecting the *Lady Starlight* had declared it the strongest strong box on the rivers.

The *Lady Starlight* had hauled a lot of things in that strong box, but never such zealously guarded cargo as she was carrying this voyage. She had carried gold and silver, sometimes diamonds and rubies, pearls and emeralds. There was some coined gold and silver in there now, but the really priceless cargo was in bags, old and sorry in their looks, having been kicked, slammed and banged to hell and gone, some patched, some probably reeking with vermin, and yet each bag held the heart, the soul, the hope and the ambition of somebody.

Mail—United States Mail! Mail for men and women far out on the wild frontier; a letter soiled and backed in a scribble hard to see and read, yet life or death for the one waiting long to feel it in his hand. Little and yet tremendously important letters, lines on paper to shape the destiny and the hearts of men. Anxious eyes were watching for them now, studying the long and dangerous old river, waiting for the blue smoke on the horizon and tall funnels to come like perfectly marching soldiers around the bend.

The strong box was intact. But what was more important now was the *Lady Starlight* herself, slow-turning in the current as Bent McClung tried to steer her with the rudders.

She was coming in on the shoals now. Captain McClung had worked her out of midstream, and the wilder currents under the high east bank seemed to steady her. Bow slowly wheeling inshore from the constant play of her rudders, the currents also appeared to ease her, to gentle her drift. Rolston could already hear the slow, almost gentle grinding of her heavy planking and the creaking of her timbers as she settled herself like a monstrous duck on the shoals. It meant that Captain McClung had saved his boat; at least, it was high and dry enough to save his passengers and the

cargo. But getting her off again would be another matter. . . .

BEAUTY DARLING returned with Yawley, the first and second engineers behind him. Darling was mad enough now to bite heads from iron spikes. He was all for killing Pinky Yawley and getting the job done.

"That's the duck who scuttled us!" he roared. "He musta seen me prowlin' 'round. He saw that the jig was up, an' then what's he do? Well, I can tell you easy.

"He put dynamite primed with detonatin' caps in a couple of big, long sticks of wood down there! One stick of that wood done the dirty work tonight. We found the other'n ready to go into the second boiler's firebox. Maybe it would have got the fire started he wanted to start. It woulda gone to the powder room, an' then the boat an' ever'body aboard woulda gone straight to hell. Let me at 'im, Swede! Let me at 'im!"

"I tell yuh, I don't know what yo're howlin' about," Pinky Yawley protested, "I wouldn't know how to get into that hold! Yuh squirts are just pickin' on me."

"Swede, I know this is our man." It looked as if Beauty Darling was going to weep. "If I prove it fair an' square, will you let me cut his throat?"

"We'll take care of him in the right way, Mr. Darling." Rolston had to push him back again. "Cutting his throat instead of turning him over to the passengers would be mercy—What's that?" He cocked his head as a lazy yet long-rolling sound came to him from somewhere below. "Sounds like a dog barking!"

"More'n a dog!" Beauty Darling suddenly tried to smile. "It's a real bloodhound. You've seen it tied up down there on the cargo deck. Pistol Sam Brown, the buffalo shooter, owns it. Pistol Sam's had it down in the hold smellin' 'round. It's right now on the trail of the fella who left them tools under the powder barrels. He'll point 'im out sure as shootin'."

"I—I don't like dogs!" Pinky Yawley's eyes were suddenly popping, no longer little and ratlike as he dragged himself closer into the corner. "Yuh fellas are tryin' to job me. I saw that fool dog down there. He's takin' it out in the Indian Country— Listen! It—it's comin' this way!"

Held on a strip of ragged rope by Pistol Sam Brown, the dog was coming on. It was a little black fellow with a blue-white belly. It did not look much more than half-grown, its ears great flaps at the sides of its head and long enough to lap well over the end of its nose, the true test of a good bloodhound. It had a voice big enough for four dogs of its size, not a mean voice but a rather happy one, rolling and ringing, first like a drum and then like a bugle all over the boat.

"Stop that damn' thing!" Pinky Yawley was beginning to wail. "*Stop it!* I can't stand dogs!"

"Why'n hell," Beauty Darling snarled, "are you so scared? How do you know it's after you?"

The dog appeared before the question could be answered. Long, thin tail in the air, nose to the deck, it came bounding in through the doorway. It headed straight for Yawley, its barking now a bedlam of bloodhound joy.

"Quiet, Napoleon!" Pistol Sam gave his rope a jerk. "Or," he glowered over the little dog at the crinking Pinky Yawley, "do yuh want me just to turn 'im loose an' let 'im eat yuh up?"

"Take it away, away!" Yawley was up, cowering, face so white behind his shielding hands it looked as if he was about to faint. "I can't stand dogs! Gawd, they run me down with bloodhounds in Mississippi! They run me down an' was goin' to hang me! Take it away! I—I put that dynamite in the cordwood. Damn it, I was in the hold, but—but don't let that thing eat me up! Take it away!"

"Eat 'im alive, Napoleon!"

Pistol Sam suddenly released the rope. Pinky Yawley screamed like a woman and dropped to his knees, hands covering his face. The little dog plowed straight into him, but it was not to bite him. Forepaws on Yawley's shoulders, big mouth pushed eagerly forward, little tail going like sixty, Napoleon only wanted to lick the shaking and crying man's tears from his face.

"Queer thing 'bout the dog." Pistol Sam growled. "He's plumb grown, though you wouldn't think it. I've had 'im four years. Done ever'thing I can do to make 'im mean, but Napoleon just won't do it. Hell, Napoleon loves ever'body—even that damn thing!"

"Well, yuh got me." Seeing that the dog was not going to bite him, Yawley started to weep, the big tears rolling down. "Yuh had to use a dog to do it. Yes, sir, a plain dog! It ain't fair. Nothin' ain't fair when it comes to pore me.

"Yeah, I put that dynamite in the cordwood!" He shoved the dog away, voice suddenly hard, eyes like those of a rat at bay, the great lumps of tears glistening on his cheeks. "I done it! I aimed to sink yuh to the bottom of the river 'fore yuh could get to Black Angel Bend! It was my chance for the big money. I was to get big pay. Yuh ain't goin' to kill me for what I done. Yuh want bigger fish to fry.

"There's gun-runnin' on this river, an' there was the fat mail contract. Lots wanted it. They played hard for it. As it is, if yuh don't get that mail through on time—well, yo're through. All yuh got so far is more or less a trial. Yuh win or yuh lose on this trip. If

yore boat was sunk here in the Devil's Rapids—"

In the excitement, expecting Yawley to confess as Hooker Davenport had been about to do, the two guards had relaxed. Pinky Yawley, playing the little simpleton to the end, had his chance. Beauty Darling had searched him; had taken one old broken-down Remington six away from him, but he had overlooked a little single-shot derringer perfectly hidden somewhere in his rags.

Pinky Yawley fired his shot, the only one he had without reloading, but he fired it with the deadly accuracy of a rifle-ball. The one fat bullet, made to split and bulge, hit the guard in front of him squarely in the forehead. His head rocked back, the blood flying from the round hole just above the bridge of his nose, and he was slumping loosely down, dead as he fell.

"Catch him!"

Everybody yelled at the same time, but it was like Pinky Yawley had said. He was little and he was light, he could get about fast. He tore straight ahead like a bat out of hell, diving suddenly as Beauty Darling and Pistol Sam made simultaneous grabs for him. He shot cleanly between them and out the door, racing to the rail as the two cursing men tangled, filling the doorway and blocking the sudden rush of those inside.

Yawley went over the rail like a bullfrog plunging into his pond. Like something dropped from the sky, he went down into that cold, cold river below.

IT WAS the end of Pinky Yawley for the time. Steam still whistled from a cracked line on the *Lady Starlight's* second boiler and could not be shut off completely until the fire was drawn, the hot water blown out and cold pumped in. It poured out and across the cargo deck, leaving a gray wet cloud alongside the boat, a screen for Yawley as he cleaved into the river in a long, shallow dive that carried him far out into the gloom, completely hidden from sight before he broke the surface.

"We do well, it seems," Rolston was growling when some of the excitement died away, "at standing around, just about getting our hands on something, and then having it snatched away from us."

Sheer helplessness rode hard on a man in situations like this, but he had to stand it. Wild talk and speculation would not help. He went below again, followed by the captain and the engineers, leaving Beauty Darling to curse himself, Pistol Sam Brown, and the remaining guard. At the moment everybody seemed disgusted, each man with himself and the next man to boot!

Men inspecting the hold with lanterns had found water seeping in around the ash-well of the wrecked boiler. A little caulking would take care of that. The rest of the hold was intact, no water coming in, and now everybody was on the alert.

They went to work to get the cracked length of steam-pipe from the second boiler replaced, cutting new pipe and getting it threaded. By sunrise it was in place and another good fire roaring in the firebox. Cargo in the meanwhile had been shifted. To lose as little time as possible, and to get rid of some of the crowd at the same time, Rolston and McClung had Beauty Darling take a gang ashore to dig graves in the sand, and the bodies of the unfortunate fireman, the guard, and Hooker Davenport were buried.

At eight o'clock with the good boiler's safety valve shooting a banner of steam skyward, they heard a whistle down the river. Before long the *Blanche Dulanty* was rounding a bend and taking the full force of the Devil's Rapids in her teeth. Rolston and McClung studied her from the Texas. There could be little expected from the *Blanche Dulanty*, but each was hoping that the wash of her big wheel would send the waves rolling under the *Lady Starlight* and help get her off the shoals.

" 'Pon my word," McClung groaned, "he's within the law, no matter what he does. He can't be held for not stopping in water where there's danger, and it's up to him to decide whether it's dangerous or not. Look! There's Booger Malone just stepping out of the pilot house with his megaphone."

"Hello, there!" Malone's voice rolled like a blast of fiendish delight across the water. "You look in a bad way, gentlemen! Don't you beginners know enough to stay in midstream when you hit the Devil's Rapids? We're laden to the limit of the law, but I'll risk stopping around the next bend to take the mail and your women passengers aboard, if you'll say the word, Rolston!"

"The mail will go through!" Rolston fought his temper down and yelled back through his cupped hands. "It's still in good keeping and going to stay that way!"

"Suit yourself!" A wild burst of laughter brayed across the water. "We made our offer. I have plenty of witnesses to prove that it was refused. We'll see you right here on our way back down the river, *Mister* Rolston!"

THE engines had been warmed up, with the big stern-wheel slowly turning. Eyes on the river now, watching the curling waves roll from the *Blanche Dulanty's* stern, McClung pulled twice on the bell-cord. Below him the engine-room bells responded with a sharply musical *clang! clang!* An explosive puff shot from the tall funnels as the engineer down there opened his throttle all the way back to the last notch on the quadrant.

Now the *Lady Starlight* quivered, a dull grating sound coming from below as she slowly moved, a few inches, a foot, two feet, three and four. Lights blazed in McClung's eyes. He started to smile. It turned into a quick frown as the boat settled to a halt. He yanked on the bell-cord. A sharp, vibrant *clang!* lifted from below. He yanked again, one, two, three, the bells answering. The throttle answered the bells. It closed with a slam. The reverse lever swung back, the dogs chattering over the teeth of the ratchet. Again the throttle was yanked open. In reverse the red stern-wheel started to turn.

Far-flung laughter came from the *Blanche Dulanty*. Her whistle let out a mocking groan. In the doorway of the pilot house both Booger Malone and the cantankerous Mr. Fritz Hoggwall now thumbed their noses at the *Lady Starlight*, and then, the white water still rolling from her stern, the *Blanche Dulanty* moved on around the bend, the smoke of her wood fires trailing ribbons in the light breeze coming down the river.

Nobody aboard the *Lady Starlight* had caught a glimpse of Pinky Yawley among the cargo on the *Blanche Dulanty's* lower deck. Pinky Yawley, knowing how to obey orders, had kept himself hidden while his clothing was drying atop one of the boilers.

"It's no use!" Captain McClung took off his cap and wiped balls of perspiration from his forehead as he rang the engines down for the last time. "We're stuck right here."

The day passed, the shadows beginning to fall again. They had bucked cargo back and forth, every available man aboard bending to the grind. The *Lady Starlight* made a dozen attempts to get off, but she was stuck tighter than a nail in a wall.

Midnight came. They still worked like devils never to know rest and sleep again. It was well after sunrise—already thirty hours late—when Swede Rolston made Captain McClung's and Beauty Darling's hearts skip beats when he virtually picked her up and blew her off the shoals by sinking four barrels of gunpowder in the deep water between the east bank and the boat, and setting them off with a fuse leading down to each barrel.

It was like being shoved off the rocks and out into deeper water on a series of tidal waves. Stern-wheel going, the man at the throttle sweating, the *Lady Starlight* rocked and quivered, but she was once more in the great swim, every stick, box and bale of cargo still aboard, and the precious mail in the strong box.

They were rounding a long, mean curve of the river just before sunset when the tall, dark bluffs of Black Angel Bend loomed ahead. The dying sunlight, especially on the high east bluff, was like shining gold smeared and splashed and streaked with dark-red blood.

Swede Rolston's hand came down on the whistle-cord. A longer, a sadder and lonelier wail never came from the *Lady Starlight's* whistle. It was a sound that went up and down the river; a keening for all the wrongs of men; a rocketing lament for the dead.

HAT in hand, six-shooters in his waistband and a rifle across the crook of his arm, Swede Rolston was the first to step ashore under the east bank on the charred remains of what had once been the wharf. There was cargo and mail aboard for Lynn Larsen's father's big log store. It could not be delivered now. Like many places on the frontier where men had set their hopes, there might never be another town here. In time men would forget where it had stood.

The store was gone, only blackened ruins lying there, the remains of the unburied dead stiff on the ground. Swede Rolston saw it all as he walked past it, his face white, the hard, steady fall of his boot-heels drumming a dirge.

She would be at the school-house, Buffalo Bill said, in front of what was left of it with the broken rifle. He had to go, he had to see, but it was going to take the most terrible grip on his very soul that had ever come to him. Beauty Darling, wondering and even afraid, was following him at a safe distance with a rifle on his arm. It was a hoarse cry from Darling that stopped him.

"Look out, Swede! There comes a redskin on a pony down yon hill, an' he's acomin' to beat hell!"

It was a redskin, all right. Feathers fluttering in the wind, long bare arms and legs shining in the fading sunlight, a red and white-spotted pony appearing to skim the ground as it came tearing down the long slope to eastward.

"An' more behind!" Beauty Darling was yelling now and crouching forward, getting ready to start fireworks with his deadly rifle as feathered Indian after feathered Indian started appearing on the high crest of the slope. "Look at 'em boil up there behind the fella on the spotted pony! Looks like they wanta stop 'im an' take his hair!"

"Look up the river!" Rolston was staring in that direction. "I think it's what they see coming!"

He had just seen the soldiers. A message had gone through somehow to one of the little, far-flung posts. Two troops of cavalry had been ordered down the river to Black Angel Bend to bury the dead and try to pick up the trail of the Indians. By the looks of their horses, they had come a long way.

"I'll spill 'im off that pony with the first ball!" Beauty Darling chuckled, and the mean sound of his voice made Rolston wheel back to him just in time. Darling was down on one

knee, rifle cocked, eyes on the sights. "Watch 'im slither off that pony."

"Wait, damn it!" Rolston took one leap and kicked the rifle aside. "Let that red come on! He's heading straight for us—say! *Say!*" He was suddenly gripping Darling by the shoulder, eyes wide, almost popping with their intent staring. "That's no Indian, Darling! *That's no Indian!*"

He threw his rifle one way, his hat another. Gaudy warpaint, blackened hair, body stained with the juice of walnut hulls, and all the beaded arm-bands and head-feathers in the world would never hide her from him. It was Lynn Larsen!

In a few moments they were coming together, the sweat-streaming pony rearing and snorting, and Lynn flashing down and into his hungrily reaching arms.

"Lynn!"

"Dan!"

Yes, it was Lynn! No one else for years had called him that. He had her in his arms now, crushing her to him, heedless of paint and feathers.

"I—I knew you'd come!" she sobbed. "I—I knew it was you by—by the way you pulled the old whistle down!"

"GAWD A'MIGHTY, 'twas plumb hell-awful! I ain't busted down an' cried like a cussed bawl-baby in years an' years an' years, I swear! It was heart-ruinatious!"

Back aboard at last, the soldiers having taken full charge of Black Angel Bend, Mr. Beauty Darling paced the Texas in the darkness. He was spitting and swearing to himself like a pirate. He spat into the wind, with the wind and across the wind; he spat in any direction his red-eyed face happened to be turned. It was not often that Beauty Darling had made such a cockeyed fool of himself. Bustin' down an' cryin' was for wimmin an' young 'uns! It jarred a real man when he even thought of such a weakling display.

It had been Olga, Lynn Larsen's sister, back home from the seminary sooner than expected, who had died there in front of the little schoolhouse. Lynn had been in her father's store, going over his books, when the Indians had struck. A few squaws in the store at the time had saved her after the reds had carried her away. This morning before dawn, remembering all her little favors, they had helped her garb herself for the escape on a pony stolen out of the herd the night before.

And white men were behind all of it! The time of the attack would have told that without a white man showing his face. Indians, left to themselves, liked to strike just before dawn. It was the deepest, darkest hour, the hour when everybody would be sleeping the soundest. But they had struck Black Angel Bend just after the children had gone to the school-house.

Six whites and every mean breed of redskin had been there to make it bloody and howling murder from start to finish. It was another old story of the frontier, one of the scores upon scores a man could tell until he grew too worn-out in voice and spirit to talk. The reds were renegades from their own tribes, hot-headed young bucks who thought they knew it all. Unable to live under the rule of their old and wise chiefs, they had broken away, joining other know-it-all bunches like themselves until they had banded themselves into a mean army bound to bring death and destruction in any direction they turned.

The six whites were men Lynn had never seen before. Bearded and as dirty as wolves, they had kept back until they could see that the reds had had it going their own way. Later they had been for killing Lynn on the spot to make a clean sweep of it, but the squaws had shown their mettle, declaring that the girl was their prisoner and that they would handle her in their own way.

Beauty Darling had heard all of the tale he wanted to hear. There would be few new wrinkles or twists to it that he had not seen or heard about before. He had seen other settlements where the dripping red hand of death had struck, whole wagon trains wiped out, dead stock and people among the burned ruins, the buzzards darkening the sky overhead from dawn until dusk, the wolves and the coyotes taking over at night.

White men were the cause of the most of it. Renegades always stirring up the reds, cheating them, lying to them, robbing them at every chance of everything but their eyeballs and their teeth, the wise squirts back in Washington not yet having offered a bounty on such things.

Nothing but trouble could come from it. Trouble was here without having to hunt for it. It was in the air, in the water one poured into his mouth or sometime the stuff one just had to wash his feet in when smells got to where they were no longer to be ignored without a man seeing them twist over their bellies and start to crawl!

It came without asking for it, even now. Beauty Darling grunted and jumped straight into the air like a grouchy old bear suddenly stung by a bumble-bee. The only warning had been a soft hiss in the air, then a dull *zurp!* An arrow had come from the tall black cliffs on the east side of the river and had driven its steel head into the deck no more than eight inches from his feet.

Even that arrow-head sticking in the deck was symbolic of the uncaring white man. It had cost some trader about two cents. The same trader had swapped it to a trusting In-

dian for a forty-dollar buffalo robe or a string of fur worth one or two hundred—and maybe wondered what'n hell the Indians were killing him for when they found out and started to scalp the booty-hungry son-of-a-gun!

But Beauty Darling was not thinking of that just now. He wheeled with a bellow of alarm, a rain of arrows falling around him, and raced for the pilot house just as a wild yelling and screaming lifted from the passenger deck: *"Indians!"*

An arching red streak, rising from earth to sky, then curving earthward, seemed to answer the bedlam. It came on down, the trail of sparks following it, its flame fluttering in the wind of its own making. It struck the tarred roof of the pilot house, the steel head driving deep enough to bury the cruel barbs, the hot flame bannering up, the tar below it beginning to melt in the heat, to smoke and bubble into flame.

It was the first blazing arrow. More and more came after it, striking the *Lady Starlight* from end to end, devil-bent on turning her into a roaring inferno right there in the dangerous narrows. And then came the rifle-fire, a sputter, crackle, and suddenly a rolling thunder from the bluffs both east and west of the boat.

CHAPTER FIVE

River of Fire

BELOW on the passenger and the cargo decks, it was as though a tornado had struck a loose pile of shingles. Crazed excitement filled the passenger deck. People jumped, slithering right and left, grabbing for this and that, not knowing for a minute or so just what they were doing. As a rule, they were more timid. But once driven backs to the wall and no other way out, they would fight like wildcats, some in their terror doing great and heroic things without knowing it.

It was a horse of another color on the cargo deck. Shunned by the swells as low-brows, untouchables, they had known little but knife and strife all their lives. The mobs on the cargo deck needed no coaxing, no slick-tongued speech-making to put them in the proper frame of mind. Hell, this was just another fight! When men and women jumped this way and that they knew what they were jumping for: guns! The few lanterns and lamps down there were blown out or knocked out instantly.

An itinerant Missouri preacher, reading his Scriptures by the wabbly light of a candle beside the wrecked boiler, was the first into action. He flung his Bible in one direction, the candle in the other, and grabbed a long-barreled old hog rifle. The ball from his muzzle-loader brought down the first Indian up there in the light of the blazing arrows. The others were joining in by then, the cargo deck sprouting gashes of flames from one end to the other as guns of every make and description raked the bluffs from each side of the boat.

Swede Rolston put the protesting Lynn Larsen down on the floor beside the bunk, with the preacher's wife beside her to shield them from arrows or bullets that might come through the windows. He pushed chairs and chests around them, blew out all the lights, and streaked it for the pilot house with a rifle in each hand and boxes of cartridges under his arms. A glance, once he reached the Texas, told him where they were.

In a straight line, avoiding the many bends in the river, they could not be more than a dozen miles above Black Angel Bend. Some of the reds up there on the bluffs were likely the ones they had seen on the crest of the long rise east of the Bend. Spotting the coming troopers, it had been no trick for the Indians to switch back and come on here, to lie in ambush while their scouts kept track of the soldiers' movements.

But there were many more reds here than the war-party they had seen at the Bend. Burning arrows were landing everywhere, the bullets raining in with them. The flames from the arrows lighted up the *Lady Starlight* from end to end. Bucket crews were already fighting them, jumping and leaping targets for the reds on the bluffs.

The man who had been handling the wheel lay dying across a broken stool with an arrow through his neck when Rolston lunged into the pilot house. The unattended wheel was letting the boat swing toward the west bluffs. Rolston shoved the dying man out of the way and righted the wheel, swinging the *Lady Starlight* back just in time to keep her from crashing into the rocks.

Now the battle was on in deadly earnest. Rough-boots from the cargo deck were working their way up to give support to the ladies and gentlemen who paid the higher fares. They gave that support without knowing it was gallant. Many of them knew nothing of the meaning of the word. They were simply getting up into the thick of it, not shooting as fast as most of the gentlemen, but making every ball and bullet go crashing home to its target.

With Rolston at the wheel now, holding it at times with his knee while he roared lead into the fight with a rifle, the *Lady Starlight* took the next bend like a smoking and blazing wench straight out of hell. Wider and more placid water loomed ahead in the moonlight. A fierce burst of cheering lifted, but the *Lady Starlight* was not yet in water wide enough to stand to in midstream and be out of range of the flaming arrows. People could get down

and out of the way of bullets, but fire was something they had to stand up and fight.

MORE narrow and dangerous waters showed ahead. A groan went up. More and more Indians were up there on the high rocks, milling figures outlined against the stars in the blue-velvet northern sky. In addition, the Indians who had started the attack were shifting their positions to be able to open up on her again when she struck the narrows.

Close enough to the bluffs to fire on them with six-shooters now, Swede Rolston drove straight on. In a few minutes it was hell again. They had to crawl so close to the east bluff that blazing bundles of brush and dry grass were hurled down on them. They fought them off, a man dropping here and there, a woman dying on the passenger deck, the itinerant on the cargo deck praying and singing as he fired, reloaded the old hogger, and fired again and again.

They went through, the one little boiler down there straining every flue, pipe and valve, the long cylinders of the engines hissing, the red wheel spinning, kicking water behind while fire caught here, there and everywhere from the burning arrows.

"'Pon my word, sir, we're living 'er through!" Captain McClung came into the pilot house, blood dripping from his right cheek where a ball had ripped open an old scar picked up in these very narrows four years before. "I hope some day they'll make steamboats out of something that won't burn."

"Better do your hoping now." Rolston's voice carried its usual slight huskiness. "Look dead ahead."

"What—what is it!" McClung's eyes widened. "Why—why, it must be another boat afire . . . No, it can't be—"

"Burning rafts," Rolston said. "A white man's work. An Indian wouldn't be apt to think of it. There seems to be seven or eight of them. Better pass the word. We can't help hitting some of them head-on."

"God, what won't they do next!" McClung wheeled to the door. "It's the mail, that's what! The mail! They don't intend for you to ever get through with it!"

"I knew it when I took the contract." Rolston's eyes were still on the burning river ahead. "But it's worth the fight for it."

"'Pon my word, sir, is it, now?" It looked as if McClung was about to crack with the strain of the fighting all around him. "Look what it's already brought you! Black Angel Bend wiped out, your sweetheart's father brutally murdered, her sister killed, the entire town wiped out. Damn it, Rolston, it's wholesale murder—"

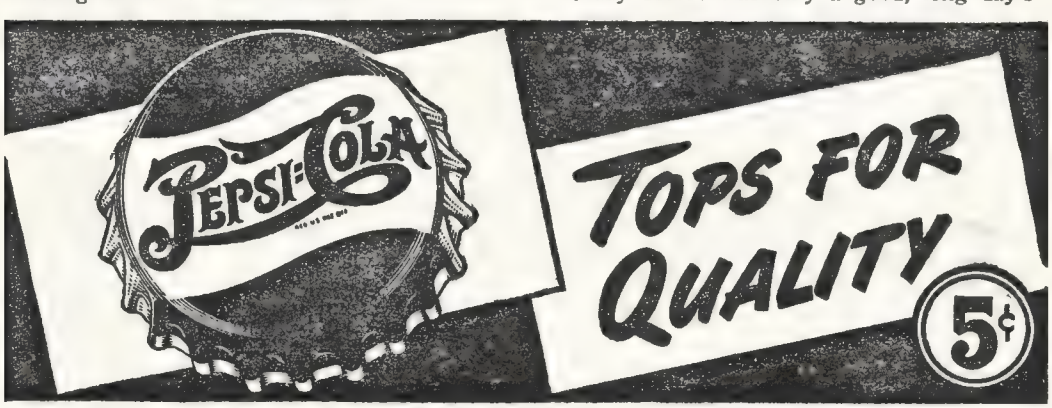
"Shut up!" Without lifting his voice Rolston turned those strangely pale eyes on him, dark, smoky-gray at times, almost colorless now. "Don't blame everything on the mail. Black Angel Bend had been slated to go a long time. It was right in the path of the Indians making the trouble, the eyesore, the listening post. Later in the spring a telegraph line was coming in. Indians knew they could cut it, but they know that, somehow, once a line is in the messages travel in spite of all they can do to stop them. They hate 'the strings that talk.' "

"I'm sorry, 'pon my word." McClung turned and patted his shoulder. "I am, I swear. Maybe I'm kind of nervous."

He was gone then. Rolston still looked ahead, something bulldoggish in his face now. The burning rafts were getting close, the light from them dancing along the river, the ripping water catching it, making the whole river appear to blaze.

THE *Lady Starlight* was just another boat that would never come through to the mouth of the Yellowstone. No man was more sure of it than Booger Malone, dozing peacefully in his cabin as the *Blanche Dulanty* lazed against the wharf at Whisky Jim Bullard's Crazy Horse in the late-morning light.

Crazy Horse was only a good, long day's



run north of Black Angel Bend, but the *Blanche Dulanty* had taken her time, reaching Crazy Horse well after nightfall.

Under the cover of darkness, a year before, the *Blanche Dulanty* would have unloaded many queer bales, boxes and barrels of cargo for the big warehouse on the wharf; but army men and frontiersmen had grown suspicious. Running guns and ammunition into the Indian Country was a rather bulky business at best. One got by smoothly enough on whisky.

Indian whisky required only a couple of gallons of raw alcohol, a jug of poisonously sweet black molasses, around ten pounds of cheap tobacco and the rest water to make a fifty-gallon barrel of the meanest concoction a redskin could pour into his gullet to start him running and jumping boar-hog wild. A few gulps of the stuff were enough to make a buck cut his mother-in-law's throat, shoot his squaw and scalp the chief.

Even now there were guns and ammunition aboard the *Blanche Dulanty* that were slated to fall into Indian hands, but great care had been taken to see that they were supposedly assigned to honest traders up the river. Major Oliver Kensington had helped them get that little matter straightened out.

Oliver Kensington was a lawyer and a gentleman, quietly known up and down the most of the rivers as a go-getter among men who handled ticklish affairs in whispers behind locked doors. Women alone found the weak spot in him. He was always falling in love with a new one, and some slick-tongued blade with the proper-hat manners was always stealing them away from him. He had control over a lot of cheap-cigar votes along the rivers, and most naturally had friends in Washington. He had fought like a tiger for the mail contract, always keeping in the background, of course, but even before last fall he had known that the *Lady Starlight* was going to take it away from the *Blanche Dulanty*. A deadly man when he knew he was beaten, he still swore that he would yet have it his way. Hired henchmen, whites and reds up here along the river, had had all winter to prepare for Mr. Swede Rolston's downfall, and now he was reaping his due.

In the afternoon, trailed by Kensington and Fritz Hoggwall, the big, black-bearded Whisky Jim Bullard came waddling aboard with Malone still napping. Whisky Jim never knocked on anybody's door, especially when excited. He slammed it open and came wheezing and barging right on in with hell blazing in his beady black eyes.

"Sleepin'! Sleepin'!" he roared. "Drunk all night an' sleepin' all day!"

"I was giving you time," Malone began, "to get all the money you could out of the passengers—"

"An' Swede Rolston, maybe," the blackbeard broke in, "time enough to catch up with yuh! One of our lookouts has just reported the damned *Starlight's* showin' her nose 'round Little Snake Bend—an' yuh said she was on the shoals! Yuh said if she got off them she'd never get forty miles above Black Angel Bend! Yuh said her boilers—"

"What in hell's wrong with you!" Malone piled off the bunk. "The boat doesn't run the river that could come through my set-up. Damn it, somebody's crazy! Somebody's lying! She—"

He caught himself, head cocking to one side, even his ears appearing to stretch to the distant sound that had come to him. It rolled from down the river like a long, painful groan.

With an oath, he shoved Whisky Jim out of the way, knocked the major aside, and plunged out the doorway, Hoggwall stumbling and falling to make way for him. His rush took him all the way to the stern.

Down the river the *Lady Starlight* had come around the bend. Even at this distance she was ugly-scarred, one funnel broken off and piled back on the Texas, half the roof of the pilot house burned away, a couple of big bales of cargo on her lower deck still smoking, death and destruction written all over her.

But Swede Rolston had taken her through.

THERE was no reason for him to stop at Crazy Horse. There was not a passenger, not a plug of tobacco or a keg of nails to be landed here. The government did not recognize it with even as much as a spot on the map.

Swede Rolston had blown the whistle only because of the tail-end of a small herd of buffalo crossing from the east bank to the west ahead of him. He had struck too many things back there. It had been living hell when he came upon the floating and flaming log-rafts set adrift up the river. He had struck other rafts, longer-logged and stronger. By sheer guts and the good steam from one little overworked boiler he had come through, the pumps going, the hose-lines running, the *Lady Starlight* blazing fiercely around him.

The worst was over now, and sad when it was done. The bodies of two women and seven men were below. Among them lay the still, quiet body of Captain McClung. Rolston was still at the wheel, Lynn Larsen now beside him in one of the dresses he had bought for her.

"An' now we've got another cuss starin' us in the face!" Beauty Darling stumped in, looking like a limping bundle of bandages from head to heel. "We're runnin' low on wood."

"There are things yet to burn." Rolston

did not turn his head. He stood there, legs spread, the girl trying to help with the wheel and ease some of the pain in his hands. "There are the tables and the chairs in the dining salon. The varnish on them will only make a hotter fire. Then there's the army bacon on the cargo deck. Two tons of it, I believe. We can't let anything stop us now. There'll be wood at Honey Bluffs, Mr. Darling."

"I'll only pray for that one little boiler to hold, sir!"

Then Beauty Darling was gone. Rolston still looked ahead. He saw the activity springing to life aboard the *Blanche Dulanty*, men running this way and that, dark smoke pouring from the funnels. They were hurrying up her fires with lubricating oil or grease.

He pushed on up the river, still looking ahead. There was desperation aboard the *Blanche Dulanty* now. He could see that she was going to put off without her passengers; anything to lighten the load. She was a trifle low on steam. He could tell that by the black smoke. But no matter what it was, it let him slip on past her and around another one of those ever-present bends.

The girl prayed. He heard her whispering her prayers several times. He still glowered ahead. He did not turn or bat an eye when they struck straight water ahead and somebody yelled that there was smoke down the river behind him. That meant that the *Blanche Dulanty* was in hot pursuit. He thought only of the strong box, safe enough despite its scars.

"You're tired, Dan." The girl leaned close, a tear in her eye as she whispered. "*So* tired."

"I'm all right, Lynn." He tried to smile, but Captain McClung's words came back to him. And then, as if one only had to think of death out here, it came.

A roar shook the river, then another, then a terrible third. Men yelled and women screamed aboard the *Lady Starlight*, but it was not the *Lady Starlight* getting the worst of it this time.

It was the *Blanche Dulanty*. Old age and few repairs had suddenly taken a drastic toll of her. Crowded with too much steam, one of her boilers had blown its belly, scattering death and wreckage in all directions. Aheels of that blast came the second. Jarred by the explosion, the second boiler had blown.

Barrels of gunpowder aboard the *Blanche Dulanty* brought the third blast. Fire blown all around had reached them somehow. By the time Rolston could turn his head to look, the *Blanche Dulanty* was no more. She was only a terrible black cloud in the sky, wreckage going up and up in the smoke, and then appearing to rain slowly down, leaving nothing but a great, dark smudge on the river's shining face.

"Mr. Jackson!" Rolston reached for the speaking tube and called down to the engine room. "Untie the safety valve and have Mr. Darling go easy on the furniture. We have all the time we want to reach Honey Bluffs. . . ."

Their heads slipped closer until they rested together, both looking up the river, waiting now for Honey Bluff to show ahead.

Nothing stopped the mail. The mail was going through.

THE END

HANG THAT HONKATONK MAN!

The Professor, whose lightning fingers could make cards lie, pianos moan and triggers talk, came to hell-roarin' Silver—to die!

Scorching Novel of Frontier Adventure

By William R. Cox

Trail of the Broken Wheels

Stirring Pioneer Novelette

By Frank Bonham

★ ★ ★

Chris Defever—Powdersmoke Prophet

By Tom W. Blackburn

Also bang-up short stories by M. L. DeVries, Stewart Toland, Gunnison Steele, Frank McIntosh and others in the March issue—on sale now!

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

THE DUKE'S HANGTOWN HOMECOMING

It took a sand-bagging by the Border terror, Black Diablo, to get Duke Bagley back to the range where he had loved and lost as a boy.... But once there, the Duke found that a few unpaid blood-debts, plus a scheming, power-crazed killer, made a situation built to order for his amazing—and peculiarly deadly—talents!

CHAPTER ONE

The Duke and the Devil

THE stout man came into El Cantino Ruiz and stood at the far end of the bar. There was a bruise on his cheek and his gray sombrero had been rolling in dirt. His silver belt-buckle was gone and his trousers had trouble staying about his ample girth. He said quietly to the bartender, "Tequila, my little cockroach. You have no bourbon, you slimy crawler."

The Mexican, understanding little except "tequila", thrust a bottle over the dirty counter and went scurrying to wait upon the tall, lean Don Alfonso Diego and his men.

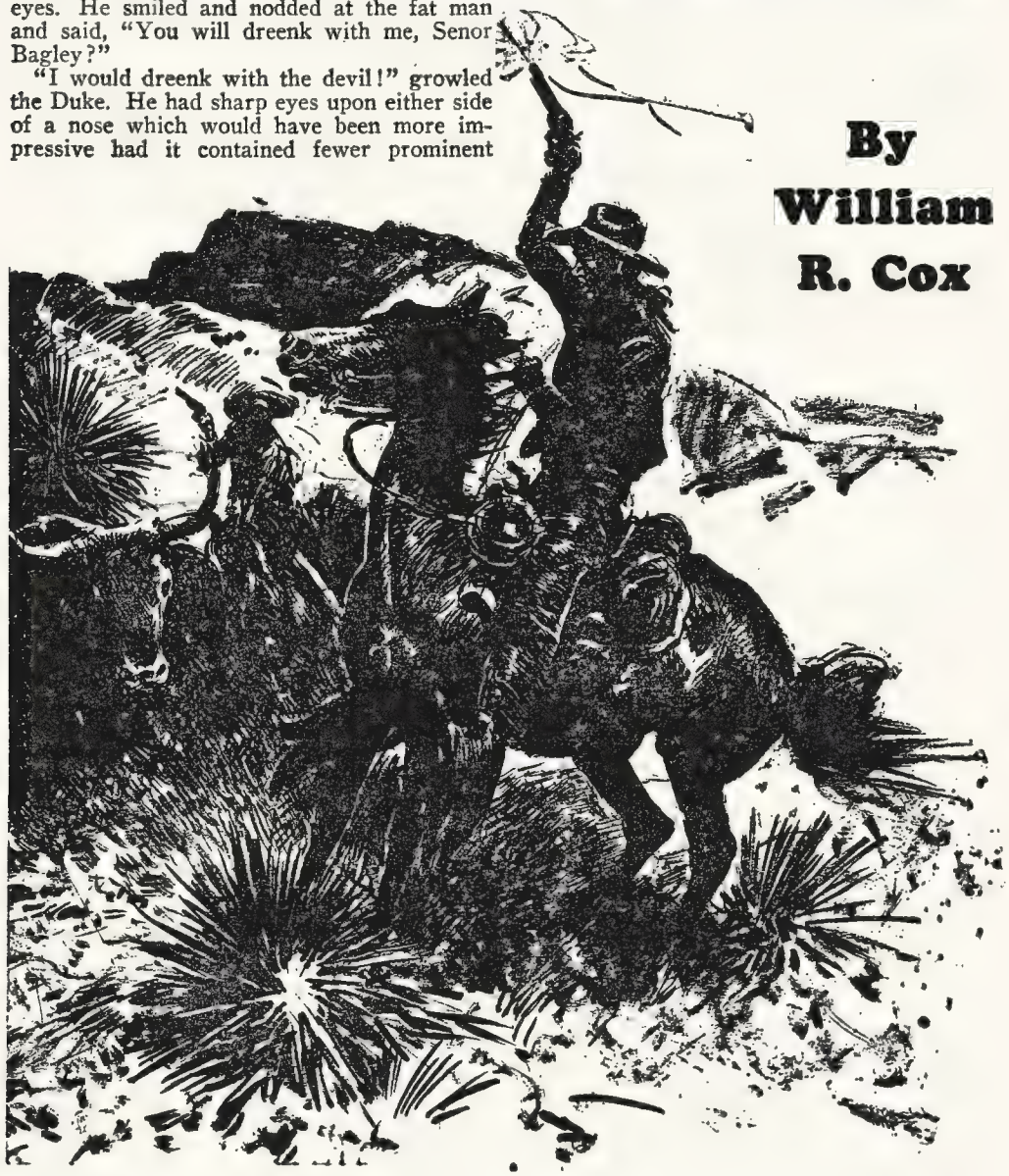
Don Alfonso wore a serape worth many dollars, a sash of exquisite handiwork and a small fortune in silver trinkets, so that he jangled when he walked. He was a handsome man, with mustaches and large, soulful brown eyes. He smiled and nodded at the fat man and said, "You will dreenk with me, Senor Bagley?"

"I would dreenk with the devil!" growled the Duke. He had sharp eyes upon either side of a nose which would have been more impressive had it contained fewer prominent veins. He had slender hands, quite white, unused to labor. He wore well-made American range clothing, slightly soiled now.

Don Alfonso moved nearer. Holding his glass elegantly, little finger extended, he said softly, "You have the appearance of a man who has suffered misfortune, perhaps?"

Duke Bagley drained four fingers of tequila without blinking, poured a second help-

By William R. Cox



The raiders struck by night, driving off the fat Box D herds. . . .

ing. "I have been robbed, set upon, beaten, disgraced and enraged, my fine-feathered acquaintance!"

"In the Casino you won many dollars, I perceived earlier in the evening," said Don Alfonso. "Perhaps others also took note. I would go nowhere without my men, myself, knowing this Ciudad Juarez." He gestured at his two retainers, a one-eyed villain with a long dirk at his belt and a short, wide peon who wore two revolvers.

Duke said, "In an alley, like a common variety of jackass, I let them get me from behind. This damned tequila! In a decent country, with bourbon, it could never happen."

Don Alfonso came even closer. He said, "Perhaps you could profit by some small employment, Senor Bagley?"

The handsome Mexican rancher had a certain reputation, but he was rich, Duke knew. Over the Border lay Texas and close by was the range Duke never wished to see, he thought sometimes, and at other times knew he must visit once more. It was the Cruces Range, between El Paso and the New Mexican line, and it was there that the young Bagley, known as "Happy Jack" had begun his adventurous career. He had paused in Juarez to increase his considerable fortune before entering that range. He had no idea of returning there without funds. . . .

He said, "If there is considerable profit, my long-nosed young fellow, I may partake of some small employment."

Don Alfonso whispered, "There is not much time. I have an appointment with a gringo of no morals. He has come over to make a deal with me. I must speak quickly—"

"Go find the dirty, low-lived rascal that jumped upon me in that alley and rob him," sneered the Duke. "If you're scared your own pair can't do it." He drank the second tequila.

Don Alfonso said, "This is no mere robbery, señor! Have you heard, perhaps, of Black Diablo?"

Duke said, "Who hasn't heard of that ear-cuttin', woman-stealin', cattle-rustlin', double-crossin' Mexican cut-throat?"

Don Alfonso said, "This jackass, this gringo, thinks to make a deal with Black Diablo. He means to run cattle over the line for Diablo and his men. Stolen cattle, mind you!"

Duke said, "Is that new? Texas rustlers been doin' that since the grandaddy of all longhorns."

Don Alfonso smiled in a superior fashion. "But this gringo thinks *I* am Black Diablo!"

Duke sank the third tequila without a trace. "Aha! Now, my two-faced friend, you are beginning to make sense."

"Thousands of dollars, American, in it," said Alfonso. "I need only a gringo on my side—Black Diablo has his Frisco Ed. You are big, fat. . . . Your pardon, señor. If you can help fool this Señor Moore—thousands for you!"

Duke said, "Moore? You mean Len Moore?"

The Mexican nodded. "A big man, eh? You know him, amigo? A man who pretends to be honest—part owner of the great Box D, of the Cruces Range. You would not think him a crook, no?"

"All men are crooks," said Duke. He was thinking furiously. He knew old Len Moore, that hardened man of another day. Len Moore probably would not know Duke Bagley, would certainly never know him for what life had done to slim, laughing Happy Jack. Duke said, "Ain't Len Moore the partner of Jeff Dibble?"

"Exactly!" laughed Alfonso. "Dibble, the millionaire cattle baron. Moore is his partner—but only a small partner, sabe?"

"Well, I'll be a cock-eyed son of a muley steer!" muttered Duke Bagley. "Into the hands of the Philistines. Yaas, indeed!"

HE FELT himself again. His luck, which had gone out with his lack of confidence about returning to the Cruces Range, was turning again. He took a deep breath and pushed back the fourth tequila, which would certainly have made him drunk and started him on a rampage. The conversation with Alfonso had been making him angrier and angrier. The patronizing attitude of the Mexican rancher, his obvious and frank rascality, had irked the Duke to his core. Now he grinned widely, hitching at his pants.

Alfonso stepped back, whipped from his narrow middle a finely tooled belt which went almost twice around him. He bowed and presented it to Duke. "Please, Señor, accept this. I took it from a big man in battle not long ago and kept it for its beauty. Upon you it will go well. And pray accept this small purse to keep us going in style." He handed over a leather pouch which clinked dully.

"Yaas, indeed!" said Duke. "Waal, waal! If we only had a quart or two of bourbon to celebrate— They took ten thousand American dollars from me tonight, Señor Alfonso. But to meet you it was worth it! Yaas, indeed!" He bowed, very gracefully for a man so stout.

They went out of the cantina. The one-eyed man, Duke learned, was Manuel. The wide, short one was called an indecent name which Duke translated freely as "Donkey." At a nearby stable they found their steeds and Duke ran his hand over the muzzle of Petey, the great black horse of a thousand adventures.

Alfonso's eyes gleamed. He said, "I will give you anything you ask for that horse, Señor Bagley."

Duke said, "My new-found friend, my companion in evil, my fellow-conspirator—never say that again. Petey is part of the Duke. The Duke is part of Petey. We are, you see, one and indivisible. Yaas, indeed." He took a revolver from his ample saddlebag. It was a long Colt, with a seven-inch barrel. With it was a cartridge belt, a new one. Duke scowled, sliding the gun in and out of the stiff holster. He said, "Item: One gun, the mate to this, and belt to match. That they stole also. Did I tell you they struck me, my friend? From behind, in the alley. I had drunk tequila, and there is a certain señorita—you understand? They took me by surprise, the foul-living, evil-smelling, double-fathered carrion. Yaas, indeed. They stole—from—The Duke!" He thundered the last words.

The two men behind Alfonso fingered their weapons uneasily. Manuel had the knife almost out of his belt. Duke's sixgun spun in his white hand like a pinwheel. His wide, humorous mouth was a straight hard line.

Don Alfonso said, "Black Diablo! It is his men, always, who perform these robberies. He has spies everywhere!"

Duke calmed. "Yaas, indeed. Waal, it's over. Think no more of it. As soon tackle the Rangers as Black Diablo! Yaas!"

Alfonso said, "There is a small ranch, outside of town, just a vegetable garden. We meet Don Len Moore there."

They mounted and rode. Don Alfonso was obviously happy and pleased with himself. His graciousness was unlimited. He spoke of his home ranch, his señora, his children. He sang little songs. The two henchmen followed silently on excellent mounts. The way to the little ranch was short, but the Duke was cold sober when they arrived.

There was already a horse tied to a rack. A man stood in the shadows, and Duke saw that his hand was on his gun. He was a very tall, very thin man, and when he spoke his voice was dry and precise, although drawling in the Texas manner.

"Diablo?"

"Si, señor!" said the rancher.

"It's him, all right," growled Duke. "Nemmine thet gun, Moore."

The Duke's voice was entirely changed, and when he dismounted and approached the house his walk was different. He swaggered, but the grace was gone from him. He seemed a gross fat man, clumsy in movement, savage in every aspect. He said, "Let's git to it. No use palaverin' around all night. We got work t' do!"

LEN MOORE came into the light of the little room within the cottage and the door closed on the three of them, while the others mounted guard outside. The Texan had a long face, almost like a sheep, yet with the cleverness and closeness of a wolf. He refused a chair, leaning against the wall, his hands never far from his guns. He said flatly, "I haven't got a dollar on me. Don't think about crossin' me in any way, Diablo. All I want to know, can yuh pay fer the steers as I drive 'em over?"

Before Don Alfonso could answer, Duke said, "Can yuh drive enough steers over t' make it pay?"

Moore said, "I'm dealin' with Diablo, Frisco Ed."

Duke said, "But I'm the one's got to check the deal. How many can yuh produce?"

"In time, more'n ye can handle," snapped the Texan. "Right now, 'bout a thousand."

Don Alfonso murmured, "A thousand, eh? Tonight?"

"Not tomorra," said Moore coldly. "I couldn't hold 'em."

"At the ford," said Alfonso eagerly. "The money is here!" He drew forth another pouch from his belt. There were American bills, crisp and new.

Moore's eyes glittered. He said, "Be thar in three hours. Don't bring nobody but the men yuh got with yuh now. That's enough to drive the herd."

"The Rangers?" asked Alfonso.

"Chasin' a couple my men thet held up a stage," said Moore carelessly. "Thet part's easy. Is the deal made?"

"Si, señor, it is made," said Alfonso quietly. "Produce the cattle. Frisco will check them. You are both Americanos; you know how you do business. Me, I will pay."

Moore walked jerkily to the door. He paused, staring back at Duke. He said, "I've heerd plenty of yuh, Frisco. We kin do plenty of business. But don't try anything funny."

Duke said harshly, "You deliver. I'll see you in Cruces, right soon, Moore. I aim to help on both ends of this. We need this cattle for somethin' mighty big—" He stopped, biting his lip as though he had said too much.

Moore turned slowly to Alfonso. After a moment he said, "If yuh start a revolution and git somewhar's—I mought kin help yuh, Diablo."

The rancher bowed. Moore nodded and went out abruptly, slamming the door. Alfonso said, "You were wonderful, señor! That touch about revolution! Perfect! What an actor!"

Duke said, "I'm goin' to enjoy this, my scoundrelly friend! At your own price, you are buying cattle worth plenty more. While you sell this batch, I will hie myself northward and do business the like of which you did not dream."

"How?" said Alfonso, frowning. "I need you here, señor!"

"How?" asked Duke. "Why should we be paying for these steers? Moore's stealin' them, ain't he?"

"Señor! You mean—?"

"No use havin' a middleman in it," said Duke happily. "The next batch we take ourselves—and split fifty-fifty!"

"And Diablo gets the blame!" said Alfonso eagerly.

"Correct!" said Duke. "Yaas, indeed! Go herd your cattle, Alfonso. I got enough money to make my way to the Cruces Range. You tell Moore to expect me, that I'm goin' to help him. He might not like it, but what can he do? We could ruin him with his partner. Jeff Dribble'd hang him quicker'n look at you."

Alfonso said, "No sooner said than done. You know this Señor Dibble, then?"

"I know Texans," said Duke Bagley. "Quick with a rope when they find a cattle-thief. So long, my rich and bountiful cattle-thief! Give my best to Diablo—if he catches you usin' his name in vain!"

CHAPTER TWO

Homecoming to Hell

ATOP the rise he gave Petey an unneeded blow, looking down into the rolling country known as the Cruces Range. Foothills in the distance led to the mountains which sent water streaming into these fertile plains. Here the cattle browsed and grew bony and leggy and fat, too, for Texas cattle. Clustered in the center of all was the tiny town of Lido.

The Duke was seldom sentimental, but here was a place he must needs pause and contemplate. In the time since he had been here life had taken its toll and many things had happened to and because of the lad who had been Happy Jack. Most of these things need not have taken place had it not been for one person.

For ever since leaving here, the Duke had fled from women. Not mankind, either, but from the love of one woman. In this place, as a youth, he had left a girl, for the betterment of her soul, and from then on he had been The Duke. . . .

He produced a red ball from his flowered vest, threw it into the air. In his hand again it became magically two balls, then three, and he juggled them, making a crimson circle of fire in the sunlight. It was a habit, so that he scarcely noted it himself, thinking back on the lad who had been Happy Jack, wondering a little if it could have happened, if that soft, carefully gauntleted white hand of middle age could have once been brown and hard and calloused from roping and riding and branding—and fighting.

She had been a blonde girl, named Mary Cross, a rancher's daughter. Happy Jack worked for the Cross Anchor. It was a simple summer idyll of handsome big cowboy and the boss's daughter.

She had blue eyes, like violets in the springtime, and her voice was soft and full of low laughter. She could ride and rope, too, and was not afraid of sun, scorpions, snakes or mankind. But she did not like the drinking and gambling. Even in those days Happy Jack had been inclined toward the sound of slapping pasteboards and clinking chips on a deal table.

And then Jeff Dibble had come in, with his own herd, and had started the Box D—a sturdy youth, as big as Happy Jack but leaner, harder. They had fought at once, and Happy Jack had won by dint of a trick or two he knew from tougher men.

Mary had saddened, knowing she must choose, and she had lingered long over the decision. Then her father was killed one night, no one knew how, shot down by a rifle as he rode his range.

Happy Jack had sought the killer. He rode the hills for days unshaven, living off the land, tracking down a man on a horse shod before but not behind. Jeff stayed behind to make all arrangements and to comfort Mary. Happy Jack returned, empty-handed, to find Mary in Jeff's arms down by the stream beneath the cottonwoods, weeping she knew not why, exactly.

Jeff stood up and said straightforwardly, "Her father owed a lot of money. Can you pay it? Can you save the ranch for her?"

"No!" she cried. "That's not the way to talk."

Jeff was gray-eyed, hard. "You're the favorite—or you were. You're cleverer and you sing and dance and make jokes for her. All her laughter is for you. Can you take care of her?"

Happy Jack said, "Waal, now—Mary, what you say, honey?"

She could not say anything, weeping. Jeff stood tall and strong and unafraid, although he knew Jack could whip him, out-shoot him, kill him on the spot. Happy Jack said softly, "Waal, I never was one for layin' a bit aside. The cards run all ways—sometimes good, sometimes bad. Guess I'm one that's to follow my luck. Guess I'm no man for a girl needs a home, good things. You fought fair, Jeff—and you got the stuff to take care of her. I know myself pretty good. I better ride."

He had ridden, and after awhile, remembering her last plea, "Don't go! Not this way, Jack!" he wept. He was ashamed, but there was no one to see, and after awhile he wiped away the tears and kept riding down to El Paso, and thence East, to the real gambling places, to the River and to the Cities and he had become Duke Bagley, then, the great

drunken Duke, the fast gun and sometimes card-sharper—the adventurer and often killer of men. . . .

HE HAD nearly gone down to the depths, time and again. But always he had managed to rescue some grace from his escapades. He had stolen from thieves, but he had given to honest, little people who could not help themselves. He had been vastly rich and poorer than a church mouse, within a day. The truth was that after he left Cruces Range he never wanted anything very badly.

He faced it, sitting there: he had left because he loved Mary Cross. She had married Jeff Dibble and had given birth to a daughter, he had been careful to learn. Then she had died.

He got very drunk when he heard that, over in California where he had acquired a hacienda and Indian workers and another fortune. He had bought Petey and begun his ride, his Odyssey of the Western Land, always with his red juggling balls and his gun loose in the holster. He had gone up into Montana, back down through the Territories, to the River again, then back West, the circle always narrowing, always coming closer to Cruces. Years had slipped by. He had said, and believed, that he wanted one more stake, to open a saloon which sold only bourbon and a gambling house where everyone must play against him. He had made that stake many times and squandered it as often and now he was come again to Cruces. He was honest enough to admit he would never have come had not circumstances—and the deeds of Len Moore and Don Alfonso—forced his hand.

He located the Box D with ease. He knew every inch of this land. He had come by this very spot, seeking the killer of Mary Cross's father.

He took field glasses from his bag and sought the ranch house. It was in the same place, but larger, and all the land was prosperous. Despite the loss of a thousand head, the Box D herds were vast.

He put away the glasses and went down the road to Lido. In the town he would not be known after twenty-odd years. If he saw Jeff Dibble—well, he would chance that. He had certainly changed enough so that Len Moore, who had seen him several times as a youth, when Moore owned the little Conch spread, was not even conscious of any similarity between the Duke and Happy Jack.

A mile from town there was a bald little hill, flat on top. Duke caught sight of a gray-painted cross, a cache of stones, and unconciously touched his hatbrim.

He saw a man, then, kneeling, his face serious, a brush in his hand. The man was painting something on one of the crosses, a new one. Duke stared, his eyes narrowing. There was a fair-haired girl upon a large rock, watching, her long legs crossed, her eyes intent, sorrowful. The shape of the girl, her shoulders, her long legs stirred something deep within the Duke, something which had not moved him in years.

At the same moment sunlight reflected upon another hilltop, a couple of hundred yards westward. The Duke's eyes missed nothing in this country. He snatched his glasses and his rifle from the boot and stood high in the stirrups. His voice bawled commandingly, "Git down there!"

He fired the rifle off-hand, aiming at the far hill. He clapped the glasses to his eyes and caught sight of a dull-clad figure scrambling for cover. He fired again, and his shot dug splinters of rock where the man had hidden himself.

He took time to glance at the hill. The painter fellow was flat on his belly, a long rifle poking forward. The girl was now crouched behind the rock, staring at the assailant. Two rifle balls whined overhead, and the Duke heard the young fellow's gun answer. He spurred Petey up the cemetery hill, dropped from the saddle and scrawled forward. "Too high," he drawled. "The man's no crack shot. Try him to the left, young friend!"

The youth obeyed, and Duke noted approvingly that his effort was exceedingly good. The man jerked to the right of an inadequate boulder. Duke shot him through the head.

The man kicked a moment, and his rifle clanked faintly on the stones. Then he was still. The youth beside Duke arose and said, "Dammit, he might have hit Mary!"

The girl came forward, wide-eyed. She

Keep your eye on the Infantry
. . . . the doughboy does it!

said, "If it wasn't for this stranger—thank him, Dan!"

THE young man was tall and straight and his eyes were dark and fine and his handclasp sure. He said, "You're a gent, sir!"

"Yaas, indeed," smiled the Duke. "Bagley's the name. Just ridin' into town. Saw you doin' yore chore—"

They turned and looked at the cross above the newly-made grave. It bore the inscription, "Jeffrey Dibble. b. 1835. d. 1885." The young man had been adding, "Slain by a murderer in the night but not forgotten by his fellow men." The printing was exceptionally neat and clear, almost artistic.

Duke said, "When did the gentleman die?"

"Three days ago, the night his herd was looted of a thousand head," said the young man. "I'm Dan Tucker, the sheriff. This is Mary Dibble—his daughter."

The Duke almost said "I know!" but restrained himself, looking into the eyes so like her mother's, taking the strong hand in his. He mumbled regrets at Jeff Dibble's demise, gazing at her, seeing the strength of chin of her father to leaven his Mary's loveliness which had not been strong enough. . . .

He said, "Cattle-rustlers, eh? Yaas, indeed. Too close to the Border, ha?"

The Sheriff said fiercely, "That's it. Black Diablo comes and goes and not Rangers nor the Army can stop him. He has a thousand men under him—and an American renegade devil called Frisco Ed."

Duke murmured, "Do tell! Yaas, indeed! Should we have a look at yonder would-be killer? Or do you just leave 'em lay here?"

The girl said, "I'll ride to town. . . . I'll check on things, Dan. There's a lot to do." She smiled at Duke, but already the cloud was on her again and her face was taut with worry. She brought up a buckskin pony and rode down the trail.

Dan sighed, "She's thinkin' of the next raid, Mr. Bagley. She and Mr. Moore stand to lose everything if this keeps up."

The sheriff had a cream-colored bronc which Duke though no law officer should ride, it being easy to spot at night, and they climbed the hill where their assailant had fallen. They made the last few yards afoot, cautiously, lest there be life left in the man and a revolver at his hand.

They came to the spot. There was no dead man. There was a smear of blood among the rock chips their shots had made. But a trail, blood-spotted, led over the hill and the corpse was gone.

Duke said, "I'd swear I got him dead center."

He rode Petey to the crest of the hill. He checked in all directions while Tucker panted at his side. There were not even dots to indicate far riders. Duke said, "Somewheres they got a hidin' place. Yaas, indeed. Not far, neither. . . . Hmmmm!"

"I know these hills! I was raised in 'em!" said Tucker bewilderedly. "There's no caves or anything like it!"

Old Si Tucker's son, Duke thought. Si had been Sheriff, too. He knew the hills . . . but did he know the Coyote Defile? Over west it lay, between two innocent-seeming peaks, masked by tall pines and deep, tangled thickets. But if you knew how to get through, there was a hole in the rock and on the other side a shallow stream. Dan Tucker had no doubt fished that stream daytimes—but at night it was a rustler's trail.

Duke said, "You can search, son. Yaas, indeed. But these old bones have ridden far. I'll jest go on to town."

"I'll find 'em!" vowed Dan.

"Yaas, indeed!" said Duke. "See you later, son."

He went on into Lido. He liked Dan Tucker. The sheriff was too young. He had indubitably been elected because he was callow and inexperienced. But he was quick and unafraid and he had decency written all over him. Si Tucker had been decent too, the time he caught Happy Jack with the wild bunch cooking some prime beef they had appropriated. . . .

The Duke rode on into Lido. The meeting with Mary Dibble had shaken him. The death of Jeff Dibble had been a shock. Len Moore had not mentioned his partner's death to Don Alfonso. The girl, of course, would inherit. . . .

The hidden marksman, then, had probably not been gunning for Dan Tucker at all. The girl stood between Len Moore and control of the Box D. Duke's eyes narrowed and flamed like twin infernos. Girl killing! He remembered Moore's gray, wolf-and-sheep-like countenance, his brooding eyes.

"Yaas," he murmured. "Yaas, indeed. Seen a fella like that once in Kaycee. Shot two women in one night. Yaas!"

IN LIDO'S one saloon, Duke reached for his money. It was night and he had seen neither the girl nor the sheriff again, which worried him a little. However, the sheriff had sensed that the girl was in danger. Had more brains than his father, Duke thought.

It was characteristic of him that the Duke had not looked inside the pouch which Don Alfonso had given him until now. He rolled the gold coins in his hand—fifties, common tender of the day. He caressed a nick in the corner of one, put it away in his pants for a pocket piece and threw another on the bar.

"Bourbon," he said. "A quart."

The barkeep was a new one since his day,

named Bob Turner, a man with a smooth politician's face. At the other end of the bar were four men who obviously were of one crowd. They were, Duke found by listening while he drank his first big gulps of the life-giving bourbon, called Tony, Red-eye, Blue Boy and Faro. They all worked for the Box D, he learned a moment later, and had just ridden into town. He examined them curiously. They were a hard lot. They looked like fighting men.

The Duke nursed his quart for an hour. He wanted to juggle, but refrained lest someone know of that trick of Duke Bagley's from another time and place. He had walked the streets of Lido unnoticed, unrecognized, and that had been a funny thing. . . .

Of course it would have been fatal if he had been seen and known. But it was sad to realize what the years had done to him. He looked into the flyspecked mirror behind the bar and saw himself: portly, florid, graying, his hair roached back in a pompadour, only his white teeth unmarred by time.

He flinched, then tried to remember how he had looked in the days when he had been Happy Jack. To his amazement he could not recall. He could see Mary Cross as well as though she had walked past him that afternoon, as her friend Jean Wilson had walked without even seeing him. But he could not remember one lineament of the young man known as Happy Jack.

He thought about this, finishing the quart. He ordered another bottle. He drank, and a peace descended upon him. Happy Jack, then, was dead. He was as dead as Jeff Dibble—as Mary Dibble. Duke Bagley—alias Frisco Ed—was left. Mary Dibble was left, and her young man the sheriff had come along.

He walked down to the end of the bar and said, "Is Mr. Moore in town?"

The Box D men regarded him, their faces expressionless. Then the one called Blue Boy—his chin showed plainly why they called him that—remarked, "You from El Paso way, stranger?"

The Duke said, "I'm lookin' for Len Moore."

Blue Boy said, "Yuh'll play hell findin' him if yuh don't keep a civil tongue in yore head!"

Duke smiled, but it was not his own smile. It was that of Frisco Ed—his own interpretation. Duke's gun slid out as though by magic and poked Blue Boy in the ribs, keeping the other riders in front of him, crouching a little, his face dark beneath the brim of his low-pulled hat. "I'll let a little hell into yore guts if yuh don't talk straight," he said.

Blue Boy became a trifle pink, then more on the gray side. He muttered, "Okay, Frisco. Lay offen me! We lost a man t'day and we ain't feelin' good about it. Go down past the corral at the edge of Main Street and wait."

The barkeep was watching stolidly. Duke could not read his face, but he had an idea the town would know that Box D men had been stood up by a stranger, which was what he was after. He sheathed his gun and swaggered out like a grizzly.

THE corral was almost out of town. Petey was inside, and Duke heard the whinny of the big horse as he approached. It was the place everyone left his horse, run by an old, deaf man named Oofy. Around the edge of the paling, a voice said, "Frisco?"

"Keep it down," Duke growled. He went forward and starlight glistened from a gun in Len Moore's hand.

Moore said, "Dammit, Frisco, whyn't you stop that dumb sheriff from gettin' Menken this afternoon? You was right there."

"Had to show him I was on his side," said Duke placidly.

"I can't spare no men," fumed Moore. "Can't let no more in on the deal, neither. Those things get out—"

Duke said curiously, "I dunno why you're worryin', now yore pardner's shot. You could take yore time and cut this thing up."

Moore said, "I got to have money and quick. I got a spread I can buy up in—well, nemmine thet. And that damn Tucker's gettin' closer allatime. He near stumbled into Coyote Defile t'day—an' we didn't dare shoot him for fear of missin' an' tippin' off the hideout. He's that lucky we could miss him at fifty paces. Him and the gal—"

Duke said carelessly, "You near got the gal today."

Moore edged forward in the gloom until he was so close to Duke that his lips breathed moisture in Duke's ear. He whispered, "Would yuh take her on, Frisco? I heard tell of yuh bein' tough. Would yuh kill the gal fer a thousand?"

Duke said slowly, "Why not? I've kilt plenty Mex gals."

Moore said, "If yuh kill her, quick, I could handle it better. I wouldn't have to take chances runnin' cattle over the—" He stopped, waiting.

Duke said, "Now wait, Moore! I ain't crossin' Diablo. I'm tough, but not that tough. You ferget about the gal, yuh hear? I ain't takin' her and I won't have nobody else doin' it! Understand that, now, Moore! Diablo wants that cattle!"

Moore said disappointedly, "I'd pay you—well, skip it. We're goin' out with another herd tomorra night. I can't be there—the gal and the sheriff watches me. Blue Boy'll handle it, with yore help. There's a thousand head in the south pasture. Grab it, go through

Coyote Defile slow, then hit downstream and fast across country. The boys'll hold any smart ones who try and follow yuh. I'll be down to get the money. I'll have business in El Paso, legitimate, this week."

Duke said, I'll take the herd down. Thet's why I'm here. But don't ever think of crossin' Black Diablo. I'm warnin' you solemn, Moore. He'll cut off your ears and stuff 'em down your throat!"

Moore growled, "That he'll never try. I've killed better men." But he added, "How does he do it, Frisco? How does he get so many men will follow him and how kin he trust 'em?"

Duke said, "He treats 'em good and shoots 'em when they don't do right. Where is this Coyote place?"

He listened while Moore told him, although he knew as well as he knew the palm of his hand where the Defile lay hidden. He nodded when the rustler was finished and said, I'll stay in town, in a room over the bar I've hired. Tomorra, I'll drift out there."

Moore said, "Mind you get 'em all, now. I need the money."

He disappeared, a gray figure melting into gray night. He had a way of coming and going without noise as though he were made of felt. Not even his spurs jangled and the harness of his cartridge belt and gun was silent. He was a sheep man and a wolf man, Duke thought, shivering a little despite himself. He was a man in a million—a man who would kill his partner and his partner's daughter and anyone else for a dollar.

THE DUKE walked slowly back to town. The Box D riders came for their horses, passing close by him, and Blue Boy muttered, "See yuh tomorra night."

Duke went into the bar. Bob Turner set out bourbon and said, "Yuh sure ran a blazer on Blue Boy. Guess yuh don't know what yuh was up against?"

Duke said, "Let me be, I'm thinkin'."

The doors of the bar swung and Dan Tucker came in. He put his hand on the Duke's shoulder and said, "I've failed again."

Duke said, "Where's the gal, son?'

"In town," he said heavily. "We went over the ranch and put two Mexicans we can trust on the south herd—a fat one. I got to tend to things here and then go out again. Diablo is liable to hit any night. If I only knew how they get out without leavin' a trail!"

Duke said, "You're weary, lad. Sleep tonight."

"Can't," said Dan Tucker grimly, draining his whisky.

"Sleep tonight, son," said Duke. "Tomorra night I'll go out with you . . . yaas, indeed."

The sheriff looked sharply at him. He said, "You mean you've learned something already? You're helping me?"

"You can take it that way, yaas, indeed," nodded Duke.

"Well, of course . . . Moore's out there tonight. Not that he has proved much use. If you know anything, Mr. Bagley, you've got to tell Mary. The girl is going crazy, since her father was shot."

Duke said, " 'Tain't my way, to tell folks things which a man can't prove. Nooooo. . . ."

The sheriff said, "Please, Mr. Bagley!" He was only a lad. It was easy to see why Moore had permitted him to be elected. He pleaded with Duke. "You've got to satisfy her!"

They walked down the street, the tall, stout man and the tall, young sheriff. There was a pleasant-seeming house and a gray-haired woman—Si Tucker's wife, but she had never known such a wild youngster as Happy Jack very well. She left the room and Dan went with her, leaving Duke and the girl together.

Mary wore a red dress, very beautiful, with her hair coiled and her full bosom caught high. She said, "Who are you, sir, and what can you do to help us?"

Duke took the red balls from his vest now. He juggled, and the girl's eyes grew round with wonder. He said, "Waal, now, it's a long story. Mebbe it's no use to tell . . . You ever hear tell of a man called Happy Jack?"

"Of course," she said promptly. "My mother called him her best beau. He left here before I was born."

"Yaas, indeed," sighed Duke. He made the balls become four between his fingers, his nimble wrist turning. He passed and they were three, two, one, then four again. "I was Happy Jack, but you mustn't tell anyone. Not even Dan."

She leaned forward. She said, "I've heard tell of a Duke Bagley. You said your name was Bagley?"

He made the red balls four, then one. Then four again, then one. Then he made them disappear. He said, "Yas'm."

She said, "You rode away to become Duke Bagley." There was complete understanding in her smile. "Like a small boy. You became famous—infamous, perhaps? Because Mother turned you down."

Duke said, "Waal, in a manner of speakin'. Was she happy with Jeff?"

"Father was good to her always. He loved her dearly," said Mary earnestly. "When she died he never smiled again . . . Oh, yes, she was happy, believe me."

"Ah!' said Duke gently. "That is good." He had not realized before how much it meant to him that his sacrifice had not been in vain. He said briskly, "And now you'll lose the

ranch if the raids don't stop, eh, my little chickadee?"

She said, "Yes. Father owed the bank some notes—"

"Notes?" asked Duke. "In these times?"

She frowned. "It was something about Len, I think. Father was protecting Len somehow or other."

Duke said, "Tell me, Mary, did they ever find out who killed your mother's father?"

"Mr. Cross?" she asked puzzled. "Was he killed?"

"Yaas," said the Duke. "Yaas, indeed. He was. Well, little one, let us say the Duke has a way of knowing things. There will be no raid tonight. When there is a raid, the Duke will know. Yaas, indeed!"

She said, "Can I believe you? Is it possible that you can ride in, save our lives from an assassin, then save the cattle?"

Duke said drily, "My little wildflower, the sheriff killed the assassin. Yaas, they believe that."

"You mean you've talked to the guilty ones?" she demanded, and her chin grew firm. "Who are they?"

"I mean, my sweet-faced child, that I listen to the ground. With my ear, like so!" He bent from the chair as easily and gracefully as a child, placing his ear to the carpet. She had to laugh, startedly, at the ludicrousness of it. He jumped to his feet nimbly and made her a deep bow. "That is all for tonight, daughter of the love of my life! Call your lawman. Tell him I have departed, but will return the morrow. Yaas, indeed!"

She said, "Oh, but you would be fun! I can see that in another time it would be wonderful to know you!"

The Duke stood straight. He said in his deepest voice, "For those words I would die, gladly. Thank you, my dear!"

He turned and went out of the little house and down to the small room over the bar which he had rented. He made a dummy of himself and placed it beneath the bedclothing, just in case, then went across to the other room he had secretly taken and slept soundly in a large featherbed. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The End of Happy Jack

THE night was full of sound and Duke's hand kept going to his revolver. He was uneasy, not as sure of himself as in other affairs. Mary's daughter had disturbed him with her directness, her trust in him.

He had given instructions to Dan Tucker, but the boy was very young and did not quite understand. It could all go horribly wrong.

Blue Boy and the other Box D men were masked. Blue Boy said, "We got to kill them Mex herders."

"I'll do the killin'." the Duke snarled. "Yuh git started fer Coyote Defile. Run them cattle like yuh allus do. I'll be right behind yuh."

Blue Boy said, "It'll take more'n one man to git the herders."

"Yuh know who I am?" demanded Duke harshly. "I don't want no bunglin'."

"Okay, Frisco," said Blue Boy. "Go in ahead, then."

They hated him of course, for his arrogance and undisguised contempt of them. That part was good. Duke snarled at them again and rode ahead. He came silently behind the first muffled cowboy. The sky was clouded and black. He said, "Ride!" He fired his gun and Petey galloped.

The second rider was already close. He muttered, "Adios, amigo! God go with you!" Duke fired his pistol and the man screamed convincingly, melted silently into the darkness.

The herd milled, frightened by the noise. Blue Boy and the others thundered down. Duke shouted, "I got 'em both! Ride!"

Blue Boy knew his business. The Box D men got the herd going toward the Defile wth amazing swiftness. They went over a hilly place, through the pass and into the close-thicketed slit between the hills as though they had been trained. Duke came last, his gun reloaded in all six chambers.

The steers found their feet in water and turned southward under Blue Boy's urging. In a little while they would emerge from the stream and hit the overland trail. The Box D men were expert cowboys, Duke admitted. Everything was going smooth as silk.

Len Moore was back in town, in the bar, drinking up a storm. He needed an alibi, of course, having been absent the night of the previous raid, when Jeff Dibble had been shot. Blue Boy rode close to Duke and said, "Tony and Pancho'll go down a ways with you, until yore men kin take over."

Duke said, "Yaas. . . ."

An hour passed. The cattle left the stream at the turning. Blue Boy said, "I'm stayin' here in case anyone comes behind, like that damn sheriff. He got Menken—I'd admire a shot at him."

"Yaas," the Duke drawled. "I kin take 'em now."

Blue Boy, Red-eye and Faro dropped back. The herd went past the last marker of Box D land. Tony and Pancho were very busy.

The single rider came from a copse of cottonwoods, unnoticed in the dark by the Box D rustlers. Duke, riding nearest to Tony, chirruped to Petey, who went forward like a black ghost. Duke's long-barreled gun swung once.

Tony slid from his cayuse in dreamless sleep. Duke dismounted and tied him with his own reata. Up ahead Dan Tucker was struggling with Pancho, who had become suspicious, and had his gun out. Duke ran along afoot, seized Pancho from behind, dragged him from his mount, clubbed him with impatient violence.

Dan said, "He—you cracked his skull! He's dead."

"About time," said Duke, deep in his round chest. "They've stolen and slaughtered for Len Moore—it is time, my young friend, that they began to pay!"

Dan said, "The herd—"

"Leave it," said Duke. "There is work to do in Lido. Moore is as clever as a fox. But he thinks I am Frisco Ed. He will talk."

Dan said, "I understand. Mary'll be with me. It's hard to believe, Duke, that all these years Len Moore has been a crook."

Duke said, "You shall hear, my young lawman, much that will amaze you. Let me get to this Moore!"

He turned Petey and made a detour to avoid Blue Boy and the rest of the ambush. Dan followed closely, and they climbed a hill, dropped down and came from the east into Lido. The light in Bob Turner's saloon burned bright, although Lido's good people slept in their beds.

DUKE sauntered into the saloon, slapping his gloves against the dust of his trousers. Moore, his gray eyes slightly narrowed, stood silent, staring, completely sober.

"It went wrong," Duke muttered. "The sheriff stopped us."

Moore said, "That dumb young 'un stopped Blue Boy?"

Duke said, "He waited till Blue Boy quit. The herd's over beyond the boundary line. Guess Tucker's bringin' it back in. What kinda plannin' is this, Moore?"

The lean man glanced at the barkeep, abandoned secrecy. He said, "Bob's all right. He's in on it. Frisco, this couldn't of gone wrong. One man couldn't stop us—"

"No?" said the Duke. "Well, Pancho's dead. Tony's out of it. The herd's headin' home."

"You?" sputtered Moore. "What were you doin', damn you!"

"Makin' tracks," said Duke slowly. "We walked into a trap. How do I know who set it?"

Moore choked, "You accusin' me—?"

"Hell," growled Duke. "Yuh killed yore own partner! Yuh wanted to kill his daughter. Why, I've heard that years ago yuh killed Old Man Cross to get a start with some of his cattle!"

Moore said, "Stow that, Frisco!" His face worked curiously. He seemed to live behind a mask, but now the mask cracked. His eyes shone. "Yuh kin know too much, Frisco!"

"It's true, ain't it?" said Duke carelessly. "Yuh made yore way killin' and double-crossin' folks. Why not us? Yuh wanted me t' cross Diablo, didn't yuh?"

"That's business!" snapped Moore. "What I do is for business and my own interests. Yuh can't bully me, Frisco Ed. I could turn yuh over to the sheriff right here and have yuh hung!"

"Which would be easier than shootin' a girl!" nodded Duke. "Or killin' Jeff Dibble or Old Man Cross—"

"I killed them—and I'll kill anyone stands in my way!" Moore snapped. "Bob—"

The barkeep had a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Duke stood very still, his hands on the bar. He raised his voice a little and said, "The sheriff would be glad to make an arrest, I think. Come in, Dan, and tell them about it."

There was a faint muffled scream outdoors. It was Mary's voice.

Duke whirled, almost reaching for his gun, then remembering that the bartender held the shotgun on him. Len Moore said in a crazy, high-pitched voice, "What the hell's goin' on?"

The bar doors swung open. Dan Tucker stepped in, his hands half-raised, his face white. Mary Dibble was at his side, trembling a little, round-eyed with amazement.

Don Alfonso's white-toothed smile flashed. At his back were Manuel and Donkey. All held convincers in the form of armament. Don Alfonso said merrily, "Something wrong, no, Frisco?"

"Yair," said Duke. "Like this devil is threatenin' to kill me. He's killed everyone else who ever opposed him."

The barkeep hesitated, his hands on the shotgun. There was a bit of motion, a streak of silver in the air. Manuel had thrown his knife. It stuck quivering in the shoulder of Bob Turner, sent him reeling, frightened, sick. Duke reached for the gun upon the bar, but Alfonso's soft voice said, "No, Frisco!"

Duke dropped his hands at his side. His thick eyebrows raised. "You are not satisfied, Diablo?" he asked in Spanish.

"Not!" said the Mexican. He fingered his mustachios, eyeing Mary. "The herd—it wanders without riders. It is all broken to bits. To throw it back together—a terrible job."

Duke said, "We got stopped by this yearlin' sheriff—"

"Si, senor," smiled Alfonso. "I was near-by! I trust no gringo!"

THE Duke froze. Len Moore, cursing, stared from one to the other of his supposed partners in crime. Dan Tucker, miserable because he had been taken even while he

waited to spring the trap upon Len Moore, was ready to take a chance. Duke snapped from his own fear to warn Dan not to try it.

Alfonso, lounging, handsome, was the real danger. His two guards were experienced, calloused killers. Len Moore would go for his gun and start shooting indiscriminately if anything started, Duke knew. Len Moore, with crimes heaped upon him through the long years, was as near to kill-crazy as a man could get. Duke remembered the woman-killer in Kaycee. . . .

He said, "Ah! I guess we are close to a showdown, eh, amigo? Yaas, indeed." He had dropped his Frsico Ed pose, now. He gently eased the red balls from his vest, began juggling them in his right hand.

Alfonso said, "Si, Senor Bagley. You have, I believe, perpetrated a small deception upon me."

Moore broke in hoarsely, "The big, fat rat! I knew thet damn sheriff couldn't stop my men alone! He crossed us, Diablo! I never liked the sloppy, dirty—"

"Si, Senor Moore, he crossed us," murmured Alfonso. "I wonder why? I paid him well. It was his idea to steal the cattle himself, thus leaving you out—" He waited, grinning in amusement while Moore relieved himself of further cursing. Then Alfonso went on, "But now he seems to want the cattle to remain with the owner—this lovely girl, no? He is a romanticist, this Duke Bagley!"

Len Moore became alert. "Bagley? That's his real name? You mean he ain't Frisco Ed?"

The olive skin of the Mexican changed color. Alfonso had made a slip of the tongue, Duke juggled the balls; they became four, back all the way to one red sphere. They became four again. Then one. His reflexes were perfect when he could do that trick. He put the single ball back into his vest pocket.

"Yaas, indeed," he said. "The Duke. Not Frisco Ed. And once I was Happy Jack and followed the trail of a man whose hoss was shod before and not behind. I never found him. He killed Old Man Cross, remember, Moore?"

The rancher's snake-like eyes were on Alfonso. He said, ignoring Duke, "Then—if he ain't Frisco Ed—you ain't Diablo!"

Duke said quickly, "Now what do you know about that? My murderin' friend is gettin' plumb smart, eh, Sheriff?"

Over Alfonso's shoulder he had seen Blue Boy's puzzled face as the Box D foreman came in looking for his boss. Duke said loudly, "He ain't Black Diablo, I ain't Frisco Ed and the moon ain't made of green cheese, my swashbuckling old murderer . . . look behind you, Alfonso!"

Blue Boy had his gun out. Moore made a grab for his weapon. Everybody did something, all at the same time.

Duke merely grabbed the shotgun and, unable to turn it loose without endangering Mary Dibble, shot out the ceiling lights, plunging the bar into darkness. He then grabbed Dan Tucker and the girl, each by an arm, and hurled them to the rear, where an exit would allow them to go and rouse the town.

YOUR COPY MAY BE LATE

Because of the exigencies of war-time transportation, your magazine may be late sometimes in reaching you. If it does not arrive on time, please do not write complaining of the delay. This delay occurs after it leaves our offices and is caused by conditions beyond our control.

In the bar there were shots, but mostly there were shouts, confusing directions and pleas for light. Duke went to where the bourbon was kept and opened a bottle. He took a big slug and walked around the moaning Turner and out into the street. He stood there, drinking and watching the scramble.

THEN he heard the rumble of hoofs and bending low, went closer to the bar, scowling. Riders were coming in—a score of them, wearing tall, conical sombreros, bearing rifles and revolvers. Manuel had slipped from the saloon and was among them, giving orders. Alfonso himself emerged from the melee, slightly ruffled in the moonlight which was now slanting over Lido as the clouds scurried away.

Dan Tucker came running. Duke intercepted him and said, "Get the town out! This is a raid!"

Tucker said, "I don't understand this, Duke—"

"Hell's fire!" snapped the Duke, the drawl gone from him, his big body tense. "It ain't understandable! But there's Mexican riders in town! Get every rifle out!"

Tucker turned and ran into the shadows. A man on a horse opened fire with his rifle. Tucker turned the edge of a house and a

citizen shouted, "What's goin' on? Who's shootin'?"

Duke slipped back into the bar. From the mix-up of men Blue Boy arose, his gun in his hand. He struck a tentative light. Duke said quietly, "Here, Blue Boy! Make your play!"

The light went out. Blue Boy swung the muzzle of the gun. Duke dipped to his holster. The new leather clung to the metal, making the draw difficult, but he got it out and fired once. Blue Boy said, "Damn you—" and doubled over.

"Quien es?" demanded the sharp voice of Donkey.

"Not Frisco Ed!" snapped Duke. He fired again. Donkey wailed in sharp Spanish. Outside, Alfonso gave crisp orders.

Bob Turner was holding onto the shotgun with one good hand. Duke leaped the bar and struck and Turner went down.

He had the shotgun, which was what he wanted. Alfonso would be well organized in a moment or two. Duke wanted only a chance to break up any plan Alfonso might make. It would take time to awaken the town, arm the folk, lead them to resistance. There was a gap which must be filled, or the looters would have their way, would pick up the Box D herd on the way out and flee across the Border. Alfonso had brought them in such numbers that they could afford a pitched battle with rangers or troops.

But there was a hiatus, before they took over, while new orders must be given, while Alfonso decided whether to take Len Moore with him or to kill him and the Box D men and go it alone. Putting himself in Alfonso's place, Duke could figure it pretty well.

He reached behind the bar and his hand struck the box of cartridges for the shotgun which he had observed earlier. He threw one into the chamber he had fired and went across the barroom floor.

There was a tableau in the street, as he had expected. The riders milled a bit, uncertain of their terrain. Len Moore, waving his revolver, was exhorting Alfonso—completely berserk now, mouthing for decimation of the town in which he had plundered for more than a score of years.

From somewhere Mary Dibble's voice said, "They've got me, Duke! The Mexicans have me!"

Moore bellowed, "Get that Bagley first!" A bullet winged close and the Duke knew he must be a plain mark. He was always a good target, being a fleshy man, he thought calmly. He strode a step nearer and bellowed, "Stop whining, you caterwaulin', Judas-souled, murderin', black-hearted devil! Alfonso, allow me to rid the earth of this pulin' fool!"

Alfonso said, "Do not try it—or anything else, señor!"

DUKE held the shotgun in his white, clever hands. He said loudly, in Spanish, "You have me covered? I have you covered! You see? This makes a fine noise, this gun! It kills!"

Alfonso said intrepidly, "But you, señor? Are you a man to die in order to take my poor life?"

"Bandy me no words," smiled Duke. "I asked permission to kill this foul rat, this renegade, this Moore. I also ask you to loose the girl. These things you will do, amigo, because I request them."

Alfonso said, "Have I the girl? Do I want this man alive?"

Moore came into range, his mouth working, the mask completely destroyed now, all the evil of him written in his long, inhuman features, like a wild animal. Duke held the shotgun in his left hand, pointing at Alfonso.

Moore said, "Hurry! Hurry! The cattle! The girl! We got to hurry!"

"Man is in a hurry," murmured Duke. The moonlight was stronger now that the clouds had gone, leaving the Texas sky a deep blue, the air cool and still. "Hold very still, Alfonso!" His right hand slid the gun from its holster.

Moore said, "I've got him lined up! Move, Alfonso!"

Duke's gun spoke from the hip, where Moore could not even see that he held it. The bullet smacked into flesh. Alfonso made a terrific, diving leap to get out of range of the deadly shotgun. Duke touched one trigger with his left forefinger. The gun bucked and blasted and a man fell from his horse and all the bullets in the world seemed to pour down at the big, fat man with the two guns.

Moore was bent double, holding his middle. Duke emptied another chamber at him, saw him go over, and for once felt satisfaction in killing a man. He had gained the scant shelter of the barroom door, now. Lead cut shreds from his shirt and one hunk slid along his shoulder, burning like a hot iron.

The Mexicans were pouring it on, but it was not their territory and they were uncertain. Duke waited. Three rode in seeking him, brave men. He rose and let go with the second barrel of the riot gun, right in their faces, under the noses of their steeds. The rocking explosion threw them off. One died; the others went off willy-nilly upon crazed cayuses.

Don Alfonso's voice had become steady, cold. "You must get him, brave ones! Attack!"

Alfonso himself had caught up a horse. He made a brave figure, riding here and there, directing his men to encircle the bar where Duke was at bay.

Alfonso said clearly, "Surrender, Bagley! We have you now!"

"Yaas, indeed!" drawled Duke. "You have a bear by the tail, Don Alfonso!"

"A volley!" ordered the Mexican leader. "Pour it on him!"

Duke moved just in time. His hat went away. He was bleeding from the shoulder wound, but a great peace was in him. He heard a Texas shout in the background. Dan Tucker had found help.

Alfonso said, "Quick! We must have him."

They came in a charge, and the Duke fired the shotgun. Then he dropped it and faded. He went through the barroom as swiftly as an antelope.

He came out the rear, the revolver in his hand. He ran around the building as the invading forces spread and circled. He saw the man guarding a girl upon a horse.

He slid in close before the man could spot him. He fired his revolver into the man's ear. He caught the girl from the horse and they stood there and Duke fired again and again.

THE RIFLES seemed to send out a sheet of fire. There were many rifles and they poured their leaden curtain from a house nearby, and from the western end of the street. The Mexican riders milled in confusion. Don Alfonso said, wailing at last, "The fat one stood us off too long. Run for your lives! Ride, vaqueros!"

Duke left the girl. He jumped and threw his arms around the slim figure astride the big horse. The man came loose, fighting like a wildcat.

The rout was general, now. From the houses poured the Texans, pumping their guns. Dan said, "Get horses! Cover the Box D herd!"

Dan was getting smarter by the minute, Duke thought. He switched holds on the amazingly vigorous form with which he wrestled. He caught a wrist and bent an arm over his shoulder, using his bulk, swinging the Mexican in all his finery. The man's body was a pendulum, his legs making an arc, his head banging on the wooden walk outside the bar, his finery trailing in the dirt of Lido's Main Street, his head thumping, taking all the fight from him.

Men came bearing torches, lights were hastily lit in the shambles of the bar. Duke pinned Don Alfonso to the bar with one hand. Gently, he said, "I will take that gun—yaas, indeed. A fine revolver, eh, my good friend? And that belt, with the money—good American money, eh, old Diablo, old Black One?"

Dan said incisively, "Is that Black Diablo, Duke?"

"Yaas, indeed," said Duke admiringly. "A fine rascal! He had to kill Frisco Ed, so he used me to take the poor fella's place with Moore. Needed a gringo, he said . . . Yaas, indeed. Gave me Frisco's belt. He even paid me off with my own gold. Found a pocket piece of mine with a nick in it in the bag he gave me. Quite a fella, Black Diablo! Sometimes he is Don Alfonso, very respectable, you understand? Then, dealin' with Moore and his like—Diablo! Stole m' guns. Stole m' money—hired me with it! Smart fella! Yaas, indeed!"

He jammed Alfonso against the bar and relieved him of his possessions, one by one. He stowed the well-filled money bag into his own pocket, threw another pouch to Dan. "For the gal," he said. "Make up for the lost herd. . ."

Tucker said, "Let me put this Diablo in jail, Duke."

A deep-throated Texan said, "Hang him!"

As the chorus took it up, Duke looked curiously at the man he had known as Don Alfonso. The bandit was rearranging his clothing with steady hands. He murmured to Duke, "You were so rough, amigo! I would not fight against fate, you should know! I picked you for a fat fool—I was wrong. So?"

Duke said, "Stout fella, hey, Diablo? . . . They won't hang you. Me an' Dan and the gal won't let em." He preferred an honest bandit like Diablo to Moore by so many miles that he would almost have shot an honest Texan to prevent a lynching.

The girl was thanking him, quietly and earnestly. Dan's arms were around her. They were a happy young couple. Dan said, "Why don't you stay here, where you belong, Duke? You can open a bar—run games. This is your country."

Duke bowed. He said, "Your country, my children! Yours, to have and to hold! I am growing old, and I have been in evil places and among bad men. I learned, recently, how dead is Happy Jack . . . Yaas, indeed. I must mend my shoulder—I must rest for the long ride. Pray, my fine little friends, excuse an old man."

He went jauntily to the room above the bar. He bandaged his wounds, very neatly and expertly, for a wound was nothing new to Duke Bagley. He sat a long while and pondered.

That Diablo was a rare one. It would be a cinch to get another good horse, take him from the hoosegow and ride for Mexico. . . A good healthy revolution, now, would be a merry thing for the Duke to try. Perhaps Diablo would make him a Duke indeed, or the Mexican equivalent thereof . . . It was a fine thing about which to think—now that Happy Jack was dead and the ghost of an old love laid finally away. . . .

THE END

HIDE-HUNTERS DIE HARD!

By Foster-Harris

The pitiful little band of troopers struggling across the Staked Plains had no claim on Lane McCoy, cashiered lieutenant. But when the savage tide of red warriors swept down, he learned that the Army's desperate fight was still his own—though each bullet he fired brought him closer to a dishonored grave!

CHAPTER ONE

Renegade From Hell's Bend

THE Texas sunlight, pouring through the broken window, was like white wine, crystal-cool. It crept over the sodden buckskin figure sprawled head on arms at the stained, knife-hacked table. In the fag-end of drunken sleep, Lane McCoy, buffalo hunter, plainsman and one-time lieutenant in the United States Army, stirred uneasily. And then, suddenly, he was awake.

He had heard nothing consciously. But nerves had responded instinctively and in his fogged, aching brain there were still the brazen vibrations of sound. Somewhere out there in the sunlight a trumpet had snarled its brief command—a cavalry trumpet. Troops,

A Staked Plains Novel

Half-fainting, he felt a big hand clutch at him.

out here? A dull shame, a fury and a sort of driven fear mixing in him, Lane McCoy got to his feet.

The primitive frontier saloon was all but deserted at this early hour of morning. It was morning, Lane realized. He had slept at the table, all through the night. Over behind the rough plank bar, Snake Cannion the saloonkeeper was staring at him dourly.

An icecake of broken window-glass on the stable made a sort of mirror. There had been glass in the window, Lane was remembering. He had broken it in a drunken fury, nauseated by the foul stink of the place. Now the broken pieces looked up at him and the filthy, haggard, whiskered face they pictured brought the dull heat of shame to his cheekbones. Wiping his mouth on his buckskin sleeve, he turned. He remembered the money in his belt and his hands shot down, fumbling, then paused, satisfied. It was still there.

"Woke you up, did it?" Snake Cannion's voice was as flat and ugly as those evil heads with which rumor said he spiked his whisky barrels. Rattlesnake heads, to give the already poisonous liquor the extra kick these buffalo hunters demanded. Lane had never actually seen any of those heads in the barrels, but from the taste in his mouth now he didn't doubt the story any. "You owe me for that winder you busted, pardner."

"I'll pay for it." Lane tried to shake the

whisky-fog out of his mind. "I—what was that, anyway? I—thought—"

"Cavalry bugle." The saloonman's grin was mirthless. He swirled liquid in a dirty glass. "Damn yellowlegs back up on the hill again. Guv'ment's reoccupying Fort Reynolds to up and save us from the Injuns you hell-benders been rilin' up. May help business here—if there's anything could help this hell-hole. But they ain't been paid."

He poured three fingers into the glass and motioned. "Hair off the dog?"

Lane shook his head.

His stomach was churning over and over inside him. "If you got some water—" he said instead. "Here, I'll pay for the window. And a place where I can wash up. I've got to get out of here, get back."

"Bucket, right outside the door." Cannion gestured with his head. "Ain't scared of damn Yankee cavalry, are yuh?"

"Scared?" Lane McCoy whirled. Brown, long-fingered hands worked convulsively above the walnut handles of the Colt Navy .36's, holstered butts forward at his sides. The saloonman started an alarmed apology.

"Hey! I never meant—"

Lane swept that aside. "Cannion, I don't think there's anything left in this world can scare me very much. Not now." He fumbled in a pocket, found a gold piece, flipped it at the staring face and lurched toward the door.

But a man can be shamed, he was thinking bitterly, and the shame rides with him, maybe forever. The nightmare of the last year. . . .

He did not even want to remember. It was over and done with, a whole brilliant career gone to smash. Nobody cared now. Yet if there were troops once again in the weather-beaten old buildings on the hill, then he wanted to get out of town fast. There just might be someone he knew.

SURPRISINGLY, there was fresh water in the barrel by the door. Lane filled the bucket and thrust his head in. When he was through, he felt a little better. Drying his face on his neckerchief, he turned, staring guardedly a moment down the straggling, sun-washed street before starting out.

Down there was the livery stable where he had left his horses, and beyond it Post and McCarty's general store, and to the right of that the big hide-yard. Buffalo hides were stocked there in great ricks, higher than a man's head. The hunters were destroying the big southern herd fast, and a bloody, dirty business was hurrying to its end, Lane knew. He hated the work. But in the buffalo country a man trained to the use of arms could make heavy money, and fast, and nobody asked about a man's past or even his name.

Away out there to the west, on the fringes of the Staked Plains, his partner, Big Herman, probably was killing in this white, morning sunlight, husbanding the last of the Sharps cartridges and wondering what the devil was keeping Lane. That was what Lane McCoy was back here in Fort Reynolds for.

They had had enough, of course, but an accident with a wagon, a drunken skinner spilling it down into a buffalo-fouled pond, and then being too drunk to fish his cargo out before the copper cartridges were soaked through, had caught them short. So Lane had ridden in with a couple of pack horses. He should have made his purchases and started right back; he had promised himself not to touch another drop, not even to stay in town overnight.

Vagrant wind brought him a whiff from the hide-yard, strong and foul, and he wrinkled his nose disgustedly. He looked to the left, slowly up the brown, gentle slope to the low hill where the sprawling buildings of old Fort Reynolds stood, deserted since the outbreak of the Civil War, and his breath caught.

They were back, all right. Troops. Atop the pole on the parade was a spot of new, bright color against the Texas sky—the stars and stripes. Despite himself, it did something to Lane McCoy. He had followed that flag so long; all his life he had planned, dreamed, worked. Now he was hurrying down the street, eyes nearly closed. He had to get out of town, quick. He had gotten his horses, he was just staggering out the side door of the store, under the weight of a case of the big Sharps buffalo shells, when what he had feared happened.

A booted, blue-clad leg, with the broad yellow stripe of a cavalry sergeant, slanted across his field of vision and before he could check himself, he was thrusting into a brawny chest.

"Huh!" said its owner breathlessly. "Why in the divvil don't yez—Ah, and fer th' love of little apples!'

"Hello, Moynahan," said Lane grimly. Here it was, and much worse than he had feared. Bill Moynahan, his own sergeant; and the outfit up there on the hill must also be his own. The Twelfth, the men who had seen him courtmartialed, cashiered.

"Lootenant, sor!" Red face working, Moynahan said it in an explosive gasp. He stepped back, the low-slung spurs on his heels clicked and a big, red hand started up to the cross-sabered cap.

"Stop that!" Lane snapped. "The name is McCoy now, Sergeant." Then he softened at the distress on the freckled, honest face. "But I am glad to see you, Moynahan." He held out his free hand and the Irishman caught it in an embarrassed yet crushing grip.

"We—we'd heard ye'd clean left the coun-

thry, sor." Moynahan was still short of breath. "I—ye're lookin' well. Buffalo huntin' now, are ye, they tell me there's piles of money in it."

"Buffalo hunting," Lane nodded. "And—you?" A million questions were crowding against his lips. Yet, strangely, even one was hard to say. "Still in C Troop?"

"Still in C." Moynahan reached big hands for the case of shells. "Let me help with that, Looten—uh, Misther McCoy, sor. Ye're not forgettin', are yez, that Bill Moynahan is the best domn packer in the Ahrmy? Want it on the bay there, do yez? Yis sor, still in Throop C and the whole squadron's up there on the hill. Sint us up here clean from Loosiana, they did, because th' domn buffalo hunters is rilin' up the Injuns till the whole border's about to blaze, so they said. Beggin' your pardon, sor!"

"Never mind. It's so." Eyes bleak, Lane McCoy looked away. Out there in the roadside ditch near the hide yard was a limp, brown figure. A Tonk Indian, dead drunk on white man's whisky; and with a white man's rifle under his bare, sprawling leg. Just an old, muzzle loading Enfield, it was, but nevertheless. . . .

Whisky, and firearms. And in due course, red hell.

"Still got the Gatlings, have you?"

"Uh, no sor." Busy slinging the cartridge box on the aparejo packsaddle, the sergeant was embarrassed again. "They—after what happened they niver sint us another gun. So the Old Man said the hell wid it, wan Gatlin', always jammin', might as well sell it to th' revolucionarios too. So he sint it back."

"I see." There were more supplies to be packed, odds and ends Big Herman had said they might as well get. Lane turned back. Grim memories he had thought to put behind him were tumbling through his mind again.

It was incredible, what had happened to him. It was still incredible, even in retrospect. Busted, drummed out of the Army, for selling arms to the Indians—for selling a Gatling gun, big as a field cannon!

Even yet Lane McCoy didn't know just what had happened, that red night at that Rio Grande ford. Maybe now he would never know.

SPREAD thin along the muddy, brawling Bravo to try to stop the sweeping raids of Iron Hand, the Kiowa-Comanche war chief, and to catch, if they could, any of Cheno Pascal's white hellions supposed to be playing with him, the Twelfth Cavalry had been sent a couple of Gatling guns by the Ordnance Department.

Colonel McAuer, the Old Man, had assigned the guns to C Troop. Lane McCoy, acting C. O. in the absence of Captain Brent Hagen, his troop commander, had accepted the clumsy weapons with concealed resentment. But he had done his best with them. And, speedily, he had come both to love and respect them.

Sure they were big, heavy, clumsy and even on their light cavalry carts, devilish hard to get into position. But once you did get them on the right spot at the right time, why they were the deadliest killing machines the frontier ever knew. At top speed their shining, brass-jacketed barrels could crank out twelve hundred screaming .45 slugs a minute. Not for long, of course, because the barrels would get too hot. But throwing that kind of a hail of death you didn't need to keep it up long.

Not hardly! Raiders caught in that lead tide just wouldn't have lasted long enough even to heat the barrels. So it had been with eager expectation that Lane McCoy had received the order to lay a blockade on that raider ford and wait.

That had been a week after Brent Hagen had returned to the troop. But, angry at being yanked out of his soft Washington assignment, already pulling wires to get sent back, Brent Hagen had had almost nothing to do with the troop. He had sneered at the Gatlings, he had all but provoked Lane to mutiny: and then he had sent Lane out on that mission, with just half enough men and one gun.

All Lane could remember was, he had set his trap carefully. Dog-tired, he had taken a long drink of the cold, lye-strong coffee in his canteen. And then, inexplicably, the world had blacked out. When angry hands and Brent Hagen's cursing voice had brought him back to dazed consciousness, the Gatling was gone, and two of his men were dead with sliced throats. At the court-martial, Brent Hagen had sworn to finding Mexican gold, five hundred pesos, hidden in the leather of Lane's saddle.

Five hundred pesos! Nothing for such a prize as a Gatling, and in the trial Lane's defense counsel had pounded valiantly on that point. But they had countered bluntly, of course he had been paid, or anyway promised, more. They had tried to make him confess.

He had been lucky, they said grimly, to escape with only a cashiering. As if anything could have been worse to Lane McCoy! The thing was a nightmarish dream from which he couldn't awaken.

"Is Colonel McAuer—is—" Throat dry, he shut his lips tight against that other name. There had been a girl too, of course. Martha McAuer. That also was gone, forever and ever. Have to get out of this town fast now, fast, before more faces showed, more ghosts,

more memories. Silently, he accepted big Moynahan's help in slinging the sack of flour, the salt and coffee Big Herman had wanted across the other pack-saddle.

There was movement inside the store, a light laugh, a woman's! And then, across the stillness as Lane half started to swing, a high, remembered voice:

"Sergeant!" Big Bill Moynahan flinched like a man under a whip. "What the devil do you mean, helping that man? That's that damned renegade, Lane McCoy!"

CHAPTER TWO

Indian Sign

SLOWLY, almost wearily, Lane McCoy turned. The tips of his long fingers came up, tapping softly against the leathers of those holstered Navy Colt's. "You're ignorant of Army regulations concerning intercourse with civilians too, are you, Hagen?" he said softly

The big captain in the doorway glared, started to take a step forward, and decided not to. His pink, well-cared-for hand was against the Colt in the clumsy Army holster on his broad, shining, eagle-buckled belt. But he didn't come out.

Instead, he took out his venom on the man who could not resent it openly. "You, Moynahan! Drop that, I said! Get the hell away from that man." The big Irishman gave Lane a despairing glance, let fall the sack of flour he was hoisting and obediently stepped back.

The sack burst at one corner, spilling little puffs of white across Lane McCoy's boots, like a silent explosion. An explosion it was. Lane took a single, jerking step forward. In the doorway, the captain saw it coming.

His pink hand wrenched frantically at the flap of that holster, too late. Then he hung, frozen. In a movement so fast it was a blur, Lane McCoy had drawn.

The long, slim, octagon barrel of the Navy Colt lay flat, straight against the space just below the belt-plate eagle. There was death in those staring eyes. Hagen saw it and stiffened with a quivering breath. Then Lane spoke again.

"You've called me a hard name, Hagen. And now you've spilled my flour. Maybe you'd like to pick it up from there?"

"Why—" Brent Hagen struggled for words that wouldn't come. He had remembered Lane McCoy as just a kid, a subaltern to be bullied. Now he was looking at a killer, and he knew it. Across the stillness Lane's voice was almost a whisper.

"I haven't got anything else to lose, Hagen. One way or the other . . . Pick it up!"

Like a man sleepwalking, Brent Hagen came stiffly across the sunlight, knelt and picked up the sack. White flour sifted across his breast and shoulder as he heaved, powdering the cavalry yellow field of his shoulder-straps with dusty pollen. "There!" he said thickly. "There, damn you! And if you're going to shoot an unarmed man. . . ." From the doorway came a woman's cry.

"Brent! I thought— Lane McCoy, what are you doing with that gun! Put it up! Put it up, do you hear?" Like a small, furious tigress, Martha McAuer was running toward them and the sun was brazen in her tawny hair.

With a sort of dry despair, Lane McCoy stepped back. She was between them now. Her hands were against the Colt and he let it slack down. "Lane, Lane, you mustn't," she said in a breathless rush. "They've hurt you enough. And you, Brent! You ought to be ashamed. Come away!"

"But—darling!" said Brent, with his hand possessive on her arm. "You—you don't—" He didn't finish. He was man enough at least to be shamed at being saved by a woman. Dull color burned above the smear of flour on his cheek. Martha McAuer would have said something else to Lane. But Lane McCoy had seen and heard enough.

Silent, he turned, holstering his pistol, and went back into the store. When he came out again, with a whole sack of flour, Martha McAuer had drawn Hagen clear over to the corner of the store building. Silently he flung the ripped sack on the ground, lashed up the pack, swung into his own saddle and led away, not looking back. When he had gone fifty yards there was a small cry and he did glance back and Martha McAuer's arms were about the blue figure and the pink hand was at that holster again, whether to draw on an enemy's back or not Lane did not know.

LANE rode on. He had had no breakfast. But he had no stomach for food now. Once Martha McAuer had meant . . . He put that quickly away. Now she meant nothing, could mean nothing at all. As he turned the corner of the hide yard, a blue figure came running from the shaggy piles and there was Moynahan again, all breathless and apologetic.

"Lootenant, sor!" The big sergeant caught for air. "Why in the divil didn't yez jist let him have—ahh, now! I mean—I'm sorry I busted yer sack."

"I know." Somewhere Lane found a smile for the distressed, freckled face. "Forget it, Bill. You had to obey. Is—is he—are he and Miss McAuer—"

"Yis sor. They're to be married nixt month. God pity a foine lady and bad cess

to—" The sergeant stopped again, torn between loyalties. Lane reached out a brown hand.

"That's all right too, Bill. She knows her own mind. Now you better get back before you're missed. If there's anybody else in the outfit—" He didn't finish that, either.

What did it matter what the old outfit, or any part of it, thought of him now? He gave his buckskin the rein. But there was more on the big sergeant's mind, and he caught hastily at the bridle.

"Wait, sor! I wanted to warn yez, too. Hell's about to pop in this stinkin' land. Indian trouble. We're up here expectin' a big campaign. Report is, Iron Hand's got guns for his noble rid hellions, all the way from the Bravo to th' Nations. He's preachin' warpath, droive all th' whites out—and start with the buffalo hunters first! Watch out fer that scalp of yours, watch ivery minute! A pity t'would be if yez got yerself kilt, like Hagen hopes to hivin and before iver th' truth came out! The way thot dirrty divil framed yes— Ouch!" Lane McCoy's iron fingers were digging into the blue shoulder with eager force.

"You know something? You know?" Lane's gray eyes were blazing. Reluctantly, the sergeant twisted himself free.

"Only the picket-loine gossip, sor. But I—yis, by th' eternal, I know somethin'! I know, in me own moind, ye niver sold thot gun and got thim bhoys' throats sliced, and so does ivery other trooper in th' outfit! Do yez not git kilt, some day ye'll be provin' it!"

"Thanks, Bill." There was movement on the slope of the fort-crowned hill, a spot of color, a guidon around the curve. "Better double back, now, quick! You've already got trouble enough, talking to me. But I'll be seeing you again. Take care of Bill Moynahan, too."

Lane gripped the freckled hand and touched spur to his horse. Heading northwest, he looked back after he had gone two hundred yards and Moynahan had vanished. But the guidon had swung up into full sight, topping a blue, cavalry column, two and two and two, on the trot. Old Hank Beaumont's bay troop, they were, Lane recognized, even at the distance and a queer tug went through him.

Cavalry, and guns and whisky and Indians. And the boom of the big Sharps bringing red war nearer with every report—yes, he knew. Moynahan hadn't needed to warn him. In her strange, merciless way, invisible Destiny once again was bringing a kettle to a boil. And if a man didn't get himself scalded, hide and hair, why maybe, meybe there'd be something in that pot for a man named Lane McCoy.

THREE days later he heard the distant booming of the guns and knew he had reached the fringe of the herd. The buffalo were not migrating now, as they had done since time immemorial. Now the vast northern herds were all but gone under the driving hail of hide-hunter lead, and the southern herd clung dazedly to its giant stamping grounds. Spread out eight or ten miles apart, like a thin skirmish line, the hunters here were killing right at the base of the Staked Plains, those illimitable, flat, treeless stretches which rear up, almost like a mesa, from the prairies of west Texas.

Riding north along the edge of the escarpment, Lane saw several wagon camps and gave them a wide berth. It paid to be careful with these hunters. Many of them were good men, but others were the dregs of the frontier, just about the most lawless men on earth. They might receive you with great hospitality or again they might just take a shot at you, especially if you chanced to disturb a stand. So Lane steered clear.

Above five or six miles from the Salt Fork, where he expected to find his partner, he cut a trail of unshod pony hoofs in the dust—maybe just wild horses, and again maybe not. A mile or so farther on he thought he saw a flicker of movement in the broken wall of the great plain to his left. It might have been a buffalo. Or again, it might have been war feathers.

You never saw an Indian on these plains, unless he wanted you to see him. But just the same, Lane rode with extra-peeled eyes the last miles. And he was extra happy when he saw the white wagon covers under the trees, undisturbed, and with a trail of gray campfire smoke lifting lazily to the blue.

There, stripped carcasses about him now, and over toward the great escarpment, behind a little knoll, the measured thunder of a Sharps .50 told him Big Herman was at work. He topped a little rise that showed him the scene and stopped to watch.

It was typical, and as always it brought a little pang of remorse to Lane's soul. It was grim, bloody business. A little band of perhaps forty or fifty buffalo had come drifting and grazing down from the high plains, toward the brackish water in the creek, and Big Herman had caught them in a perfect stand.

In a buffalo wallow not fifty yards from the surviving beasts, in plain sight, Big Herman was kneeling, loading, firing, running a wiping stick leisurely through the barrel of his huge rifle, loading and firing again. He killed at every shot.

And the buffalo were not running away!

It was a trait of theirs, so stupid, so incredible that even now, as he watched for

the thousandth time, Lane still couldn't quite believe. When you caught a bunch that way, and when you took care not to startle them with abrupt movements, why, if you killed cleanly often you could get them all. They wouldn't notice the noise! Only the smell of blood at last, or the stricken plunge and bellow of a bull not instantly dropped would stampede the rest. Otherwise, the living would quietly graze until their death.

There were only a few left now, and perhaps, despite his distance, they had caught Lane McCoy's skylined movement. One of them whirled ponderously to run now. Big Herman instantly dropped him, loaded like lightning and downed another who had caught the scare. But it was too late.

The rest, eight of them, went lumbering back toward the towering palisade of the Staked Plain and Big Herman stood up, beating his hat angrily against his leg. Then he saw Lane, whirled and the Sharps came up again. And then, at Lane's yell, he was waving.

"Spoilt the best stand I've had since you left, you big ox," he complained as Lane came up. But he was grinning. "Aw hell, don't matter. Like as not we won't be waggonin' even these buget slabs of hide into town with our own hair safe unless'n we start mighty pronto. You bring all them ca'tridges I ast fer?"

"Two cases." Lane gestured. "Two thousand rounds. That enough?"

"May not be." Big Herman bit off a mighty chew, ruminated and spat. "You, uh, cut any sign, comin' up?"

"Pony tracks, five, six miles back. Unshod. Might have been strays," Lane informed, and Big Herman spat again.

"Yeah. And mebbe jest wild Comanches too. Somebody kilt and sculpt a couple skinners, up th' way, day befo' yestidday." Big Herman supplied the ghastly details of what had been done to the bodies. "Don't sound like stray-hoss work," he finished wryly.

"Well, there's cavalry at Fort Reynolds again," Lane said. "They're out after Iron Hand and they'll get him! You—"

He was cut short by Big Herman's cheerfully derisive snort.

BACK in the war Big Herman had served in the Texas Confederate cavalry and his opinion of their opposite numbers in blue was beautiful in its happy contempt. This despite the strange fact that he had a Yankee saber scar in the most embarrassing of all places, on one broad buttock. "Stuck me, he did, while I was squshin' him to death in my bar' arms," he explained that, when he had to, with a broad, stained-toothed grin. It was just possible it was so.

"Yeah, they'll git him, I betchu! Kill him right tuh death o' old age, anyways. But they did have a brush with some o' Iron Hand's Quahadas up no'th o' here recent. So I hear tell. Column workin' outa Fort Richardson. Iron Hand's back, all right, they say he's claimin' he's got a medicine now that'll sweep all us po' lil' white boys right smack intuh hellangone. Hunters along here got a meetin' called for Sunday, at Cottonwood Spring, see if they're agonna let him."

"Got a new medicine, has he?" Frowning, Lane swung down, to stride along with his partner and rest his horse. "Well, they'll listen to him. That devil's got the worst of three races in him, Big. American, Indian, Mexican. Or maybe the best."

The old, bitter thoughts were back again and Lane looked away, at the shaggy, brown lumps of slain buffalo, dotting the brown grass. Would he be doing any different in Iron Hand's moccasins? he was wondering. No, probably not.

These buffalo here were the Indians' food. And this was their land, part of it, at least, pledged to them by solemn treaties with the whites, broken by the whites almost before the ink was dry.

Perhaps the Sioux, farther north, were more spectacular. But the red riders of these southern plains, the Comanches and their fewer but even wilier kinsmen, the Kiowas, were no men to mess with.

They thought nothing of making a sweeping raid from their villages in the Palo Duro, in the breaks of the Canadian, in the high country that would one day be western Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle, clear down deep into Mexico, hundreds of miles! Their red shadow lay across thousands of Texas square miles, and with the Texans they had a death-feud. And now they were making their last stand.

Perhaps Iron Hand, son of a Kiowa father, a captive white mother, and with the fierce, hot blood of Mexico also in his veins, so it was said—perhaps the war chief did have a great medicine at last. At least this much Lane McCoy knew. Now that the red leader was back from that tumbled, mysterious Mexican wilderness to which he had fled, that unmapped land which Mexican troops had probed for him as angrily and uselessly as United States troopers had sought on this side of the Bravo—well, now, if he willed, that Iron Hand could swing a torch to set this border ablaze.

He helped with the skinning and the staking out of the huge hides to dry, and that night they hobbled and close-herded the stock. It was just as well. About an hour after dark Thomp Robertson, one of the two skinners

the partners had hired to help on the hunt, stepped up to the fire to pick up a brand to light his pipe. He straightened, holding the burning stick to the bowl. There was a wet, thwacking sound, clipped feathers were sprouting suddenly at the skinner's throat, and a yard-long, blood-wet warshaft behind. He went face down, clawing, into the fire. And the night was split with the spine-chilling gobble of the Comanche war-whoop.

CHAPTER THREE

The Red Tide of Murder

"GREAT GAWD, they're stompeding th' stock!" Dozing, back to a saddle, Big Herman did a complete back somersault, and came up with his Sharps. "Git away from th' fire! Git to th' hosses!" From the hip his big .50 thundered a lance of flame, and the blackness returned a death scream.

The whirling circle about the fire was a blind hell of noise, bells, shots, yelling, dried buffalo hides cracking and booming in the hands of racing red riders. And above all was that never-ceasing war-whoop. Once heard, it would echo in a man's brain forever. Flung back into the shadow of the wagon, Lane McCoy was shooting with his Colts.

They were that close. A nightmare of plunging, rearing shapes going by and the nasturtium flame of powder, the z-z-zing of long war arrows marking their flight. Cold all through, Lane felt his right gun run out, stopped himself short and dived for the rifle at the wagon wheel. It didn't do to get caught completely shot out. Not against these raiders.

He had the long gun, he was buck-jumping after Big Herman. The crack of pistols and the screamed cursing of Eph Robertson, the other skinner, out with the horses, showed where he was making a stand. A giant, black phantom, a horse and yelling rider came right at Lane and he let them have it, so close that the blast revealed the paint on the contorted face. He must certainly have got that Indian. The raider, as certainly, must have been roped to his mount, Indian fashion, with a rawhide lariat. For he did not fall. He was gone, and the whole mad cavalcade with him, a retreating tornado of derisive yelling in the night. Lane was in the midst of a frightened, snorting, rearing mess of horses and mules, grabbing frantically for picket pins and ropes, trying to hold them.

That was all, for the night. But it was enough. In gray dawn, grim-faced, they took stock and found themselves with four horses out of eight, one span of mules, one man to bury and another, Eph Robertson, the dead man's brother, with a long, ugly lance-slash, clear along the upper left arm that had fended it off just in time.

All up and down the line of hunters' camps red fury had struck, so a haggard rider reported, a horseman who came in just as they were piling rocks above poor Thompson's grave, to keep him from those other prowling wolves of the plains, the ones who ran on their own four legs. Probably the extent of the attack, necessarily dividing the Comanche forces as it had into such small bands, had been all that had saved them from much worse, Lane mused bleakly. The call was out for a meeting of all surviving hunters at Cottonwood Spring at once.

"I reckon we'll go," Lane told the rider and drew a dour, assenting snarl from Big Herman.

"We go or right likely we ain't goin' nowhere agin. Plumb ever." The big ex-Confederate turned to glare toward the giant wall of the escarpment there to the west, the direction the raiders had vanished. "Yes seh, 'nuther night like last and I bet we settle. Permanent."

With but one wagon team left and none of the horses well broken to harness, they decided to abandon one wagon and most of the iron-heavy hides, and double team on the other wagon. Cottonwood Spring was twenty-odd miles on north, a long, hard day's going for wheels, even with four mules pulling, in this trackless, broken land. "And if it hain't hyar when we git back, well, anyways our ree-mains won't be markin' the spot whar," grinned Big Herman dourly. "Aw right, le's pile and skedaddle."

Other outfits were doing the same, they discovered. They passed two camps where wagons and hides had been left, to be reclaimed, perhaps, if the owners lived. If they didn't, well, it didn't matter. A greater game than mere hide-hunting was afoot on the plains this blistering day; and ominously, there were no buffalo.

"Smelt Injun and vamoosed," Big Herman growled, and Lane nodded silently. It was another amazing and yet attested fact about the big beasts. White hunters might slip right up and decimate a herd, yet let an Indian come near and immediately the buffalo stampeded. They could smell Injun for a mile or two when the wind was right, so Big Herman affirmed, and so long had the red man preyed upon the monsters that their fear of him was automatic and instinctive.

THERE were no buffalo. But there was flickering, heart-tightening movement, now and again, out there in the heat-waves of the plain. And once, atop that towering wall to the west, the escarpment, there was a white flash-flash-flash as of a heliograph signaling.

But nothing happened, and they nooned at a sink where there was water of a sort. Water fouled, as usual with any standing water out here, by the buffalo; and as usual it put Big Herman into a fury. Not even the Comanche raiders could make him half as mad.

"I'll kill 'em!" he exploded as usual, glaring at the pond. "Damn 'em, I'll kill every stinkin' one and their mammies too! Lettin' theirselves go in all the drinkin' water on a whole damn' continent! They oughta be exterimenated plumb damn' extinct. What's that!"

That was a flash of white, away out on the gently rolling, brown prairie to the east. Lane had already caught it. Stepping up on a wagon hub, he shaded his eyes, and drew a swift, amazed breath.

"It's an Army ambulance. Headin' north, and one, two, three, four—not more than six troopers with it! Oh, the fools!"

"I wonder," murmured Big Herman dryly, "I wonder now, will th' Comanches leave them dinky lil' caps on when they sculp 'em? Or will they take the caps off and sculp 'em and then put 'em back on so's them Yankee sojers won't ketch cold? And they were gonna ketch Iron Hand!"

"I'll bet you my share from this hunt they do!" flared Lane, and stepped down, starting for his horse. There was no real venom in the big ex-rebel, he knew. The mere fact that he was out here, partner with Lane McCoy, ex-Yankee cavalryman, was proof of that. Ordinarily Lane might have chaffed back. But this was no time for levity, even though Big Herman probably would say otherwise. Those troopers out there either must not know what had happened during the night, or else they were mad as March hares.

"I'm going to ride out and warn 'em," he told Big, climbing into his saddle. "You and Eph stay here!" For the wounded skinner was scrambling toward the wagon seat. Lane gave his buckskin his head and went at a hand gallop.

Certainly the little party saw him coming. But the ambulance did not check. It was one of the regulation square, canvas-topped, Dougherty ambulances, Lane noted and drawing nearer, felt his throat tighten. Those broad, blue shoulders riding just in rear, those certainly were Sergeant Bill Moynahan's. And the rider beside the near front wheel was Brent Hagen.

They did check as he drew close enough to shout, and Brent Hagen swung up a gauntleted hand in an angry gesture. A stubby Spencer carbine muzzle swung threateningly toward him, and Hagen's face was an ugly mask as he rode up.

"This all the men you have with you?" Still incredulous, Lane stared. "Good Lord! Hagen, do you know what you're heading into?"

"If he makes a move to draw, let him have it," said Hagen through clenched teeth, to the little knot of blue troopers, now pulled up very close to the ambulance. And then to Lane: "I suppose it's any of your damned business what decent men do?"

"Yes, it sure is! When a damn' fool's leading 'em, maybe to their deaths!" Furious and through forever with being polite, Lane glared back. "I'm telling you, if you don't know, all up and down this line the Indians—Oh my God!"

The ambulance curtains had parted, and the face looking at him was Martha McAuer's.

"We're not scared of the Indians, Lane." Her smile was a little white, he noted, but calm. "Father and the rest of the regiment had a big fight with the hostiles, up on McNelly's Creek. They drove the Indians north, back to their reservations, and there isn't a hostile left in this part of Texas, the courier said. But father was hurt. I'm going to him! You mustn't stop us; I'm well protected."

"You don't know—" began Lane dazedly, and the captain slashed out an angry order. "All right, driver, go ahead! We're wasting time. Move out!"

The whiplash cracked over the four-mule team, the ambulance surged ahead. Powdery alkali dust foamed in Lane McCoy's face as the blue riders closed up behind it.

FOR an instant Lane McCoy sat stunned. Then he was spurring in a savage rush, up abreast Hagen again, catching at the bridle.

"Wait! Great God, man, you've got to understand! These plains are swarming with hostiles. They hit us last night. We're gathering at Cottonwood Spring for a stand and you'd better come in. I tell you—"

He had pulled the big, cavalry mount to a halt and they were boot to boot. The ambulance was driving steadily on, leaving them in its dust. "You damned renegade," Brent Hagen spoke through clenched teeth, "you can't tell the United States Army anything. Turn loose of that bridle or I'll kill you like a dog."

The flap of his holster was up and his hand was on his pistol butt. He made a jerking motion. Automatically Lane's hand moved in a flat, blurred arc. A big, blue horseman came plunging between them, breaking them free.

"Love av hivin, Mister McCoy, don't!" A whisper, no doubt, was what big Sergeant Moynahan intended it for. But his voice all but boomed. There was a sort of horrid desperation on his face, the freckles standing out against a gray, and his carbine muzzle was swinging. He'd obey that order his commander had given, Lane knew. Obey,

though it killed him too. Bill Moynahan was a soldier. Baffled, Lane stopped and the blue riders slid away.

They were pounding after the ambulance now, the sergeant veering in rear of his leader to break the line of fire, either way. Across the widening distance Lane could see the small, white blur of Martha McAuer's face, looking out through the back curtain. Somewhere, deep back in his dark brain, the thought moved in strange, calm, dispassionate fashion, utterly remote, disinterested. How could a man, even Brent Hagen, bring the woman he loved out into a peril like this, how could he be so blind?

Perhaps they'd get through. After all there were eight carbines in that party, counting the driver. Good fighting men; and perhaps red raiders who had not been willing to pay the cost to rub out just four buffalo hunters the night before would shirk the bill there too. But with a woman along, a white woman—

Hammers pounded all along the inside of Lane McCoy's skull. Maybe he was insane, he thought wearily, maybe all this was just more of the mad dream he'd felt life to be these endless months. But one thing he knew.

He had not put Martha McAuer out of his life. He'd thought he had. But now he knew differently. She'd be with him forever, no matter what. He started to set his horse on the ambulance's tracks, stopped, and looked back. Over there was his wagon and Big Herman, mounted now, riding very slowly to meet him. White-lipped, he swung back.

"They wouldn't listen?" The big ex-rebel's voice was soft, and very dry, as he came up. "Now ain't that jes' too sad!"

"They wouldn't listen. There's a woman with them, man!" Lane croaked. "Colonel McAuer's daughter. Her father's been hurt and she was going to him. With just eight men!"

Wide-eyed, Big Herman said nothing. And then a sort of weariness, an infinite disgust filmed across his faded eyes. "Yankees!" His voice was eloquent. "If I was a gal, I—well, what we gonna do?"

"Not much we can do." Lane drew a long, hot breath. "But at least they're going our way. If it's all right with you we'll tail 'em, long as we can."

"And when they git gobbled by the hos-tiles, as they're agonna, why then, suh, we'll be sauce fer the barbecue, sho'!" Big Herman beamed. "Okay, son, come on! I allus did wonder what it felt like, bein' the polecat at a picnic."

LIGHT-LOADED, they kept the ambulance in sight. Most of the time, anyway, though it drew gradually away. The sun crawled down toward the west and at perhaps an hour before sundown they crossed Dry Run, where that giant rock wall of the escarpment veered away in a great bay, and away out there at the head of it was Cottonwood Spring in its little grove.

A natural for defense, that spring was, provided you had enough men to man the cutbanks around it; and Lane judged there would be buffalo hunters enough there by now to do just that. But the ambulance was heading straight north. And to reach the spring, Lane and his party must turn west.

So here it was again. Fork of the trail and fork of the trail and that dry, bitter, choice of the damned forever. One way a man must go while everything in him cried out that he take the other. Yet what good to follow that ambulance farther now?

If it was attacked, he could bring no aid. He couldn't take the reluctant Big and the wellnigh helpless Eph with him. One lone, extra gun, inside or outside the circle, wouldn't mean a thing. And yet . . . and yet . . . Agonized, Lane McCoy twisted in his saddle. From the wagon seat, Big Herman, watching, made a soft, understanding sound.

"When a man cain't he'p it, ain't no use to hang and grieve," he said, sympathizing. "Mebbe, now, they'll be jes' bull fools enough to git th'ough. You and me—" his breath went in a slow hiss, caught. "Oh, oh! Lookut, son, look! They're alistenin' to you now!"

Far off, but still clear in the westering light, the ambulance was whirling, as though on a fixed pivot. The tiny, blue toys of the horsemen were all confused. Now they were fanning out in a line, and the amublance was coming straight back. On the dead run, Lane realized.

"Indians!" He scarcely knew he said it. But that must have been his voice. In the wagon, swearing in a steady, even stream, Big Herman was tossing the reins to the wounded Eph, gathering up his buffalo gun, and scrambling out.

"Why the good Lord eveh made 'em!" He had his own saddle horse loose from its lead rope now, was going into the saddle like an enraged bear. "Yankees! Eph, yuh chuckhaid, so' arm or no so' arm, git on them reins, hightail! You heah! Hit fer th' spring, they'll mebbe be needin' that ammunition thar. Gottasave them shells. But us—"

He gave Lane a tobacco-toothed grin. "Hell, a man allus can pick him up a sculp on these damn' pee-rar-ries! Git goin'!"

Badly scared, the wounded Eph needed no further command. Maybe his arm was stiff and sore, but he made it work. The wagon cracked and went like a rocket, straight for that distant clump of greenish-gray. In its dust-trail, Lane McCoy nodded across to his partner. "Thanks, Big."

Tiny puffs of white were spurting from the blue line out there now, men on both ends shooting. "Looks like they need us."

"Better save them thanks, boy." A huge rifle couched across his forearms, Big Herman had swung his horse abreast Lane's and was watching with hot, savage eyes. "Whoo-ie, lookut 'em come! Better save them thanks, because when they git in sight, I'm gonna count. If they's ree-ly that many hostiles out thar, I'm agonna jine the Injuns!"

RIFLE ready across his saddlebows, Lane McCoy already was spurring toward the fight. Grim, blazing drama was unfolding before his eyes. Dust spurting, the pitching, swaying ambulance was coming on the dead run, and behind it the troopers were firing from their saddles. Lane still couldn't see the Indians, but they must be swarming like bees. As plainly as though he were at Hagen's side, he knew what the officer was trying to do.

There was no cover out there. Nothing, not even a buffalo wallow deep enough to shelter a rifleman, give that desperate little knot of troopers a fighting chance for life. The gentle roll of the prairie was deceptive. At a distance it might hide even a mounted man. But what Brent Hagen needed now was something hard, solid and vertical to get behind, a ditch, a ravine, rocks, anything. The thin, canvas sides of an Army ambulance, the gentle swell of prairie sod, they were not enough.

Hagen must make it back, if he could, to the cutbanks of Dry Run. If he was being pressed as hard as it looked like, he'd never do it, Lane thought mechanically. And then the Indians came.

Even expecting them, Lane McCoy still felt his heart go clear up into his throat. They came over a rise. But it was as though they were sprouting, straight up from the brown prairie itself. Smoky, westering sunlight caught on the brass of their ornaments and bridle jewelry, the steel of their weapons, and they were fanning out in a great, sweeping line, ends curling forward.

"Good Gawd!" Beside him, Lane heard Big Herman's gasp. "Well, hyar's whar I j'ine 'em, son. Thar's the whole Comanche nation!"

They looked it. In the manner of a Kiowa-Comanche battle line, they were eddying as they came. Each horseman cut little circles, right and left, distracting the trooper fire. The effect was like a boiling tide. Now Lane could hear their yelling. And there was something more.

They were not hurrying.

They came instead like hunters making a drive. Confident, leisurely, inexorable; and there was something about that more blood-freezing than the warwhoop.

"Le's go!" Battle-lust on his face, Big Herman spurred forward, and Lane let the buckskin surge with him. The yelling was blowing against their faces now, like wind from a fire. And there, very close, was the ambulance.

Disaster struck it like a bolt of lightning as a lead mule went down, whether from a bullet or a leg in a prairie-dog hole Lane never knew. Racing full tilt, the wheel team never had a chance. It reared, the ambulance went over with a splintering crash of dished wheels. The yell to the left lifted to triumphant crescendo and a wave of red riders came sweeping in.

"Stretch it out, Big!" In a screaming rush, Lane McCoy beat them to it, and was out of his saddle, shooting. Behind him, the thundering beat of Big Herman's .50 Sharps gave rolling echo to his fire, and the red rush broke. Two rawhide saddles emptied. They were not ready to pay that high; not yet. Caught under the wagon bed, the ambulance driver was struggling frantically, trying to evade that pileup of lashing hooves right in his lap.

The ambulance curtains ripped apart, and there was the girl, clambering out. There was a smear of blood across one cheek, but otherwise she was unhurt. She had a pistol in one small hand and her face was calm. In the team pileup a mule was screaming now, final note to hell's own symphony, and Lane could not hear the girl's voice. But he saw her lips form his name. There was no time to waste. Whirling, he caught her up with one arm and spun toward Big Herman, still seated in his saddle.

"Here!" He swung her up. "Get her back to the spring! Can't make a stand here, they'll massacre us! I'll get the driver." Big Herman' huge arm reached and above it his red face was nodding in understanding. Bridle-rein gripped in his left hand, Lane swung back.

He pulled the driver free, felt him lurch away. The thin, blue screen of troopers was right up against the stricken ambulance now. Somebody screamed a command, thin in the clamor, and two or three of the soldiers swung down. They were firing rapidly with their stubby seven-shot Spencers. Acrid, black powdersmoke blew across Lane's face as he whirled back to get his own big rifle into play. This was crazy, a voice within him was saying, this was no place for a stand. He caught a glimpse of a figure on foot, running. Brent Hagen, afoot, face convulsed, and a yard-long war arrow sticking through the cloth of his left sleeve. A feathered rider came surging, Lane caught him in the sights, and the world exploded in his face.

He was hit, he knew that. Knew it vaguely, as though it were tidings from infinite dis-

tance. He was on all fours, swaying. A blue sleeve came down, wrenching at the bridle reins still in his left hand. Something—thin, like a ramrod, an arrow, slapped against his face. He fought back. "Hagen," he knew he said thickly. "Hagen, damn you." The rest was gone in thundering, bellowing dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Medicine of Iron Hand

HE MUST have retained some kind of consciousness, thin as an oil film above that tide of dark. It was like a swift nightmare. But, afterward, he would remember. Action in puffs like the splash of ricochets in sand, ghost-like figures riding away. That would be Brent Hagen, on his horse. And rifles firing in a stammering hysteria as other unhorsed troopers, there at the wrecked ambulance, made a last, desperate stand, and Lane knew he must have fired with them. Then there was a red, freckled, frantic face and a boot kicking out of a hooded stirrup, and above it all, a voice.

"Fer th' love av God, sor, grab! Grab th' stirrup leather or—"

That was all.

The dusk was like thick, black powder sifting down when he came back, and he knew that first. Then he knew he lay against some sort of a bank, not very high. Three feet, maybe. The sky above him in the last sunset flare was like thickening blood, deep color, yet next to no light in it. His face was wet and moisture was between his lips, stinking, sickening stuff. He tried to spit it out. A quick, big hand clamped his mouth.

"Comin' around, are yez, sor?" That was Moynahan's whisper, sure as the devil. Big Sergeant Moynahan! "S-ssh!" The fingers went hard against his lips as he tried to speak, to raise up. "Lie sthill! Yez couldn't be closer to death was yez dead, sor. They're all around us, th' dirty rid divvils! We're in a loop av th' Dry Run. Cut off."

"Did—the others get away? Miss McAuer—"

"She did unless thot big pardner av yours dropped dead on th' way. Last I seen they was goin' hell fer leather, straight west. And thot Hagen, ah, Mother of God! Rode out on yez, rode out and lift his own min to die. Did yez know—"

"On my horse." Wearily, Lane McCoy lifted himself, trying to shake that gray numbness out of his brain. "Yes, I knew."

"Some av th' boys got away afther him," said Moynahan unsteadily. "I—will yez listen!" Far away, yet distinct, thunder was talking on the prairie and Lane knew what it was.

Buffalo guns. They lifted to savage crescendo, died swiftly away to an occasional, leisurely spatter. That would be the hunters at the spring, Lane knew, a fierce pleasure running through him. So they were there. A dozen or more of the big guns anyway, and that wasn't a wipeout. No such small flurry as that would end buffalo hunters. Lane looked at Moynahan and saw the big Irishman's grin that told he was thinking the same.

"We'll have to get there, somehow," Lane whispered. His hand crept, exploring, up to his head. There was a gash there, already blood-crusted, and it felt like his head had been split apart.

Moynahan's lips were against his ear. "With all th' Injuns in Creation bechune us and there? Sure and it'll be aisy! But how do we do it?"

Lane didn't answer. Darkness was coming fast now. His rifle was gone, along with Moynahan's horse. Vaguely, he wondered what had happened to that horse, how they had contrived to escape thus far alive. No matter. Moynahan still had his carbine and the two Navy Colts were in their holsters. Maybe they could make it in to the Spring, crawling, afoot. Maybe not.

They started out, crawling along the Dry Run. And just at the last ebb of that bath of bloody light they saw Indians to the north. There were many of them, gigantic on their ponies against the sky, and in their midst was something that looked like a big travois or maybe a shapeless wagon. Then it was gone in the flooding dark and the wild escorts with it. The sound of their chant came back.

"Dah-ee gyhat-bou! Ah dah ah! Ah dah ah!"

Lane put his lips against Moynahan's ear. "Hear that? Kiowa. If I got it right they were singing about the medicine and coming to kill. Now what—"

"Well, it's all up and down th' border Iron Hand's sayin' he's got a big medicine," the Irishman whispered back. "Somethin' crazy. Though if thot's what thim rid divvils yonder had wid 'em, it looked as big as a cannon. Holy Mother! Do yez—could it be possible—"

"I'm beginning to wonder," said Lane grimly. "That wasn't a travois and it wasn't a wagon, either. Great God! Why doesn't it get dark!"

IT DID, swiftly enough, though the minutes seemed ages. Sliding across the flat with cold tingles up and down his back, Lane found the trail left by the raiders and felt it carefully, with his hands. There were wheel tracks in the soft sod. They were narrower and shallower than wagon tracks, and they were steel-shod, as a Mexican carreta would not

have been. Intuitively, Lane McCoy knew what they were.

Silently he guided the sergeant's big hands into the tracks. Moynahan, after a moment, knew also, and all but whistled in his amazement at the way these twisting trails, after so long a time, had crossed again. Just in time, Lane got a silencing finger across his lips.

"Come on." He formed, rather than spoke the words, against Moynahan's ear. "Got to get through, warn them." There was about one chance in twenty they could slip through the raider cordon, he knew, and long odds against even a warning doing the little party besieged at the Spring any good. But it had to be tried.

They slipped on. Once they lay flat against a rotting buffalo carcass while shadowy riders passed not twenty feet away. Again, only the stamping of an Indian pony, over a rise, saved them from walking right into quick death. At the gray before first dawn they were in the broken land just south of the Spring. But there were Indians in front of them and they had not made their way in.

"Maybe we can slide left some more, get around 'em," Lane found a shred of voice, to whisper to the exhausted, swaying Moynahan. "Time's running out—wait! Still!" There was movement to the right front, the grunt of a straining man, then the faint clank of metal.

Here, where they lay, the caprock of the giant plateau behind them, to the west, had broken down in a spattering of diverging ridges. Due north, Lane knew, and not a half mile away, was Cottonwood Spring. From the ridge, where he lay, to the spring the land sloped smoothly down, and the hunters would not be worrying much about an attack from this direction. It was the east they would be watching, where ravines, low swells, some underbrush provided enough cover for a mounted attack to get close before launching that final rush home. But something was happening here on the ridge.

Straining, as the gray ghost of the coming light strengthened, Lane caught first the white blink of wagon tops down there at the Spring. They were pulled very close together, it looked like, corraled, forted up. Under those wagons, he knew, the big rifles were waiting. Hunters and Big Herman and Martha McAuer, and what troopers had lived to make it. And Brent Hagen. Lane started to twist, went very flat instead at the swift drum of ponies' hoofs to the right rear. And then, as they receded, he dared a look over the top of the broken rock, and caught his breath.

Something dull golden was winking up there in a niche on the ridgetop. He knew what it was immediately. The brass barrel of that Gatling that had cost him a life's career. There were no more than three or four dark figures visible about it, but the hollow behind, wild horsemen were racing away, east and north. As plainly as though he shared the red leader's brain, Lane sensed Iron Hand's plan.

The attack, of course, would come at sunrise, or perhaps just as soon as those racing riders could reach the red line over there somewhere in the broken darkness to the east. But just before the attack roared in, this Gatling, commanding the spring from the flank, would beat down the defense with a storm of death.

It would be like the snapping jaws of a trap. The Gatling fire to break, confuse, hold down the hunters until the wild riders were right on them. And then it would be too late to stop that charge. It would work.

LANE was looking at Moynahan's gray face. He couldn't ask. There wasn't any chance out of this one. Maybe they could get to that gun, maybe they could spill it on over the edge, jam it, wreck it. But that they could escape alive from the feat was not even the stuff of dreams.

They could crawl unseen back through the rocks part of the way, perhaps. A close range attack would be the last thing on earth those gunners up there would expect. But at the very best there would be fifty or sixty feet to go in the bare open.

Nothing to do but try. Down there, beneath the snarling, ten barreled muzzle of the gun, were Lane McCoy's friends. Big Herman, Robertson, the hunters. The woman he loved. And the worst enemy he had on earth, Brent Hagen.

Moynahan's exhausted face was asking a silent question. Lane shook his head, motioned vaguely on toward the camp. He crawled slowly back to catch the cover of rock that would lead him toward the gun, and when he glanced over his shoulder, Moynahan was following.

Fortune favored them as they went, for there was a pow-wow going on over by the gun. Excited gutturals reached them, too low for Lane to decipher. But it was Kiowa again that they were speaking, he was sure, and there was an unmistakably dubious note to the voices. Perhaps this great medicine of the white man, this many-times shooting iron, was not exactly their idea of happy close company. No telling what such white medicine might do to Indians. There were men moving away from the gun, Lane realized. Then, just as he had about reached the closest possible spot still under cover, there was an enthusiastic scurry of moccasined feet moving back, going clear back to the ponies a good two hundred feet or more in rear.

Red streaks were in the eastern sky and the sun, Lane knew, must just be tipping the

prairie. No time at all left now. A long-barreled Colt in either hand, he twisted his head to make sure Moynahan also was set to leap and charge at the signal.

Out there in front somebody said, "Ah! Tah-ah-dei!" in a snarling voice. The dawn ripped wide open with the thundering roar of a ten-barrel Gatling, firing as fast as a brown arm could spin the crank.

There was no need to scream to Moynahan, no chance. Lane McCoy was up, charging, running like an antelope. He had nearer seventy-five than fifty feet to go, but in the pounding, rolling blast of the gun those red cannoneers would scarcely have heard a cavalry charge. There were only four of them.

Three were serving the gun, two indubitably Indians but the third, the gunner, apparently some breed of white man. At least he wore breeches and boots and a wide sombrero. The fourth, in a buffalo-horned headdress, whirled and danced ten feet behind the gun, and obviously he was a medicine man. He it was who whirled, pointed and screamed, and Lane let him have it in that howling face. But he knew he shot next the Indian turning the crank.

The Gatling stopped and the gunner whirled. He was a renegade white. His face was one thicket of bristling, reddish beard topped by staring, bloodflecked eyes. He had a pistol coming up from his belt and Lane shot low, belt-high, to stop that. Simultaneously Moynahan must also have fired his big Spencer, for the man's face washed out in a gout of blood.

Howling, the fourth man, with a feed magazine in his hands, dropped it and fled. Moynahan again it must have been who got him. For by then Lane McCoy had reached the gun.

"GET it around! Great God, get it around!" He heaved crazily, and for all that the cavalry rig was scores of pounds lighter than the usual Gatling field mount, still it seemed as heavy as a cannon. But he had it half reversed before the slower Moynahan sprang to help him. He was yanking crazily at the elevating wheel even as the sergeant swung the trail. The muzzle dipped, he seized the crank which worked this monster like a coffee mill. He swung it and the Gatling ground, one long, rolling, drink of death, pointblank, into those red riders and ponies, still huddled, still stunned. . . .

Screaming, some of them went away from this white man's medicine that could turn so murderously on red hands that had thought to use it. But more did not. There were threshing ponies and brown bodies out there when the drum ran empty and the gun stopped with a clash. Mercifully, the smoke half-hid them.

"More ammunition." Big Sergeant Monynahan had not forgotten his training. He was pawing in the ammunition chests, bolted right on the carriage, on each side of the gun. He came up with another magazine, a big, clumsy, canteen-shaped drum, which he slapped into the feed slots with a clang.

Lane McCoy's long fingers were moving over the breech mechanisms. It was the defect of these Gatlings, aside from being heavy and clumsy, that they were also complicated.

But the faceless renegade, whoever he was, on the ground there, obviously had known his Gatlings. Hot vapor trailed from the gun, but she was ready to roll. Lane looked at the sergeant and grinned.

"Well, sure and we're takin' 'em to hell wid us, high, wide and han'some!" Big Moynahan grinned back and gasped. "It can't last. We'd better git the gun—uhoop!" He ducked as lead struck the rim of the ridge behind and screamed angrily just over their heads.

The aroused camp below, briefly hammered by that first blast, and unable to see what had happened next, was shooting back. Bending low, Lane twisted and dared a look over the rim.

Down at the Spring there was still shadow, and in it Lane could see the pale blossomings of the hunters' rifles as they fired. They were shooting at him, or rather at the huge, betraying cloud of powdersmoke which still hung about the gun. But over to the east, from his higher site, Lane could see something else.

There was the mass of the Indians, and they were preparing to charge. Hundreds of them; and with them undoubtedly, as a war chief should be, Iron Hand. No doubt he was wondering just what the devil had stopped the Gatling, his stolen white medicine, from its merciless pounding of the camp to cold meat for the charge. But it was too late to investigate now. And with all those warriors—

"Help turn her around again, Bill." Lane swung to grab at a wheel. "They're fixing to charge. Here's where we throw up a dam." There was no breath for anything more.

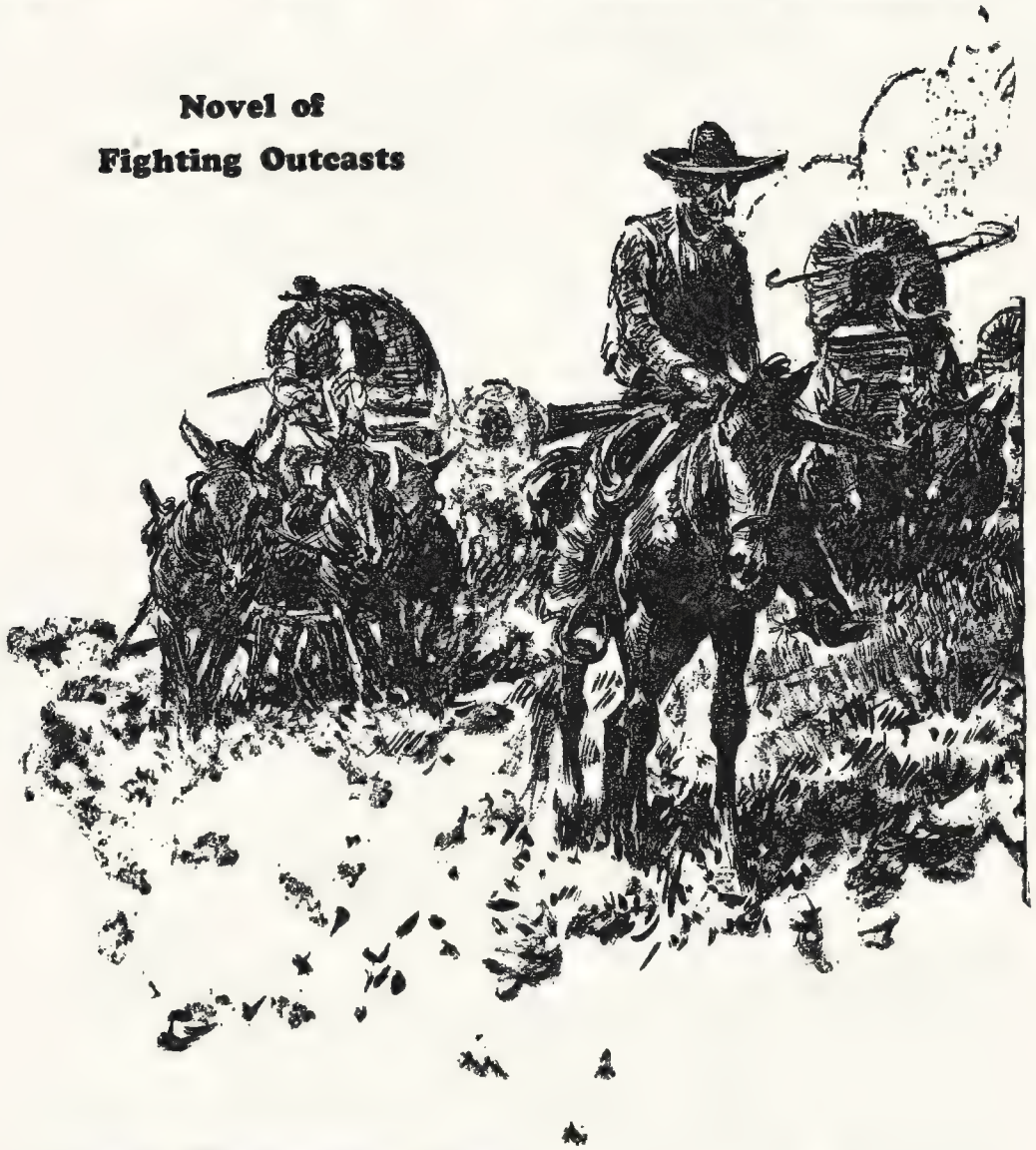
But to reach the Indians, the gun had to come out to where the hunters could see it. The thunder of their Sharps swelled to one angry roar. They could shoot, too, for lead screamed off a wheel tire and the sergeant twitched and looked at McCoy. But there was no time now for anything but action.

Riders were spinning out in front of the red line now, whooping, no doubt, steaming up the charge. Now it was coming over the rise. "Arrah, yez damn' fools, look!" Screaming, the sergeant popped to his feet, waving wildly, pointing. "Shoot at thim, not us! Look,

(Please turn to page 92)

WAGONEERS'

Novel of Fighting Outcasts



At frontier Westport, stern Army discipline kept thousands of cursing wagon men from pushing on into the war-flaming country ahead . . . And in this seething outpost, Rand Quarternight knew that one turn of the cards would give him and his league of outcasts either their wagon-trail destiny—or swift, flaming death!

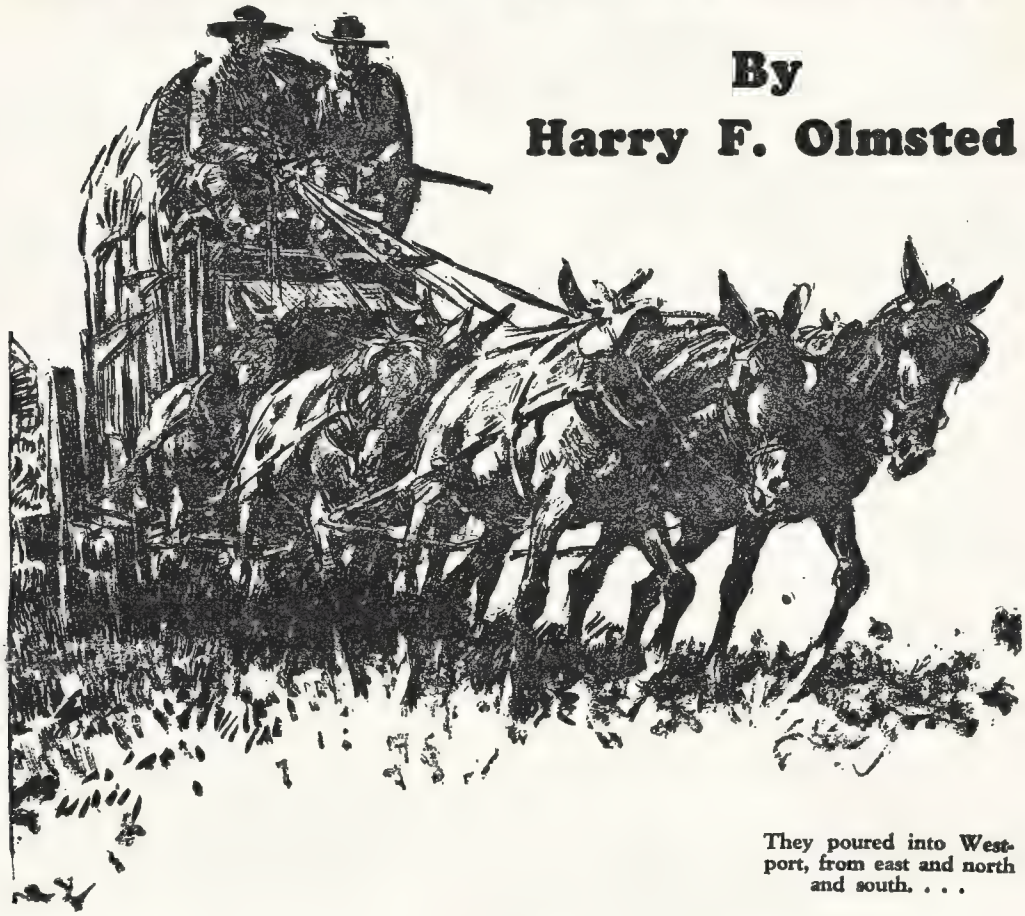
CHAPTER ONE

Mystery Man

CONVIVIALITY ebbed noticeably as Rand Quarternight entered the main saloon of the *Dixie Belle*, sidewheeling northward up the moonlit track of the broad Mississippi. All eyes, all interest, fixed momentarily upon the lithe, buckskinned scout as he moved to the bar. An amused laugh lifted as he gave his order.

GUNSMOKE QUARANTINE

By Harry F. Olmsted



They poured into Westport, from east and north and south. . . .

"Lemon soda."

Rand turned slowly and looked upon a motley assortment. Better-class Europeans bound for Upper Basin colonies; an English lord traveling five thousand miles to kill buffalo; a Belgian bishop enroute to his Santa Fe vicarate. Rich planters headed East to the cotton marts through Saint Louis; down-easters lusting for newly-discovered Colorado gold, and, dominating all, stone-faced professional gamblers fleecing adventurers driven by a will for quick wealth.

At one table, Rand spotted hawk-like Razor Hone—a notoriously successful river gambler. Bucking his layout were two goateed planters, a stiff-backed Army sergeant, a diminutive hunchback with a gentle face and sad eyes, and a pale, nervous youth with dark burnsides, silken stock and fine broadcloth.

This last, thought Rand, would be Milton Stovall. . . .

Rand's mind skipped back to his yesterday's talk with old Ike Stovall, in Vicksburg. At dinner in the Planter's Club, Ike had bared his soul. "Rand," he had said, "your dad and I were close enough so I can feel free to call on his son for help."

"And you'll get it, Ike. But how can I help the biggest levee contractor on the river?"

"Heard you were heading for parts West soon—" Ike paused. Then, "Rand, will you believe that I've wound up fifty thousand in the hole, in five years?"

"Sounds like you've been gambling, Ike."

"In a way, maybe I have. On the Santa Fe Trail haul. I own Prairie Freight—Westport to Santa Fe. It's eaten all I've made here and fifty thousand more, money hired at the bank. Common sense should tell me to get out, but instead I'm quitting construction, determined to make Prairie pay. My family's in Westport and they need me. I'll need time to close out here. I want you to locate the sores in my freight layout. Can do?"

"Money's being made on the Trail, Ike. What's happening to you?"

"Everything. Corrals raided. Fires. Scamped mules and wagons. Pressure against my contracts. Trains attacked and looted. My luck ain't that bad, Rand. Sam Romage, an experienced, capable man, has done his best to run it for me, but he's getting discouraged. Find out what's at the root of it, Rand, and when I return to Westport, I'll pay—"

"Forget it, Ike. I owe you plenty. "Who's your top competition?"

"Damon Rossiter. Calls himself Sunset Transportation. I don't doubt he's behind some or all of the dirty work, but I can't prove it."

"An' you'd like me to get said proof, eh?" Rand was suddenly ashamed of the block of Sunset stock he had won from a Natchez gambler. "I'll look into it, Ike. Been thinking some of entering the Santa Fe trade myself, in a small way."

"I think I can offer you something better, Rand, And by the way, my boy, Milt, and his sister have been visiting me. Milt's carrying twenty-five thousand north to rim the bank for an extension. Boards the *Dixie Bell* at nine tomorrow. If you're aboard, sort of keep an eye on him, will you?"

Rand had promised. And though he had never seen Milt, he recognized the Stovall stamp on the young dandy bucking Razor Hone's brace game—maybe with Ike's twenty-five thousand. Rand wondered. Noting the Army man rise and throw his cards down angrily, Rand strolled over, jingling a stack of double eagles.

"Seat for a gambler, gentlemen?"

Hone looked him up and down. "It's no game for pikers with chicken feed, Reuben."

"No roof?" Rand laughed, fishing out a fat roll of yellowbacks. "Fine."

"Get in." Hone riffled the cards blindingly.

AT ANOTHER table, somewhat removed, Aaron Berson, captain of the *Dixie Belle,* played poker with friends. One, Major Colvin of the Army Engineers, said: "The picturesque scout craves a shave from Razor Hone, Cap."

Berson smiled. "Tough shave, Major. Rand Quarternight, once of Natchez, has learned his pips and lived fast in his twenty-nine years."

"Quarternight?" Brice Taylor, New Orleans lawyer, studied. "The name recalls Murrell's defunct Clan of the Mystic Confederacy."

"Yes and no," said Berson. "Rand's father was Runnels Quarternight, a good man and honest gambler. His sin was preying on Murrell's ruffians, at Natchez-Under-The-Hills, when the Vigilantes struck. Some died that day who were not scoundrels. Runnels married Sam Houston's cousin. Rand inherits his father's honesty, his uncle's courage. Raise five, gentlemen."

"Too rich for this hand," said Taylor. "Seems I remember Quarternight in bad with Mississippi law. Murder, wasn't it?"

"All killing is murder to a lawyer," laughed the major. "I'll see you and lift you five."

"Your money, Major." Captain Berson tabled his cards. "No, Rand's case was hot young blood, whisky, a girl's fair name bandied by a scapegrace who needed killing. The Cherokees welcomed Rand, as they had his uncle. From them he went to Santa Fe, joined Doniphan and fought with distinction through the Mexican campaign, I understand. My deal, gentlemen."

At Hone's game, Rand had chunked in a thousand, pocketed his roll and stacked his chips, the players eyeing him. Frontier scouts were seen less often on the river now and never with thick rolls of hundred-dollar bills.

Rand won three small pots, the planters refusing to tap their tall stacks, Milt Sovall losing with tight desperation. John Hatfield, the hunchback, played his cards close to his watchchain. Now Rand looked ruefully at a beautiful full house, deliberately discarded it and saw startled looks pass between Hone and the planters. Hone won, taking Stovall's last chips. The youngster stood up, smiling tragically.

"Broke, gentlemen. Your poker's too fast for me."

"Entirely at your service, Stovall." Razor purred seductively. "Any amount you say."

"Enough's enough." Anger came to Stovall's eyes at Razor's shrug and short laugh. He stood behind his chair, looking on, as if loath to leave. The deal rattled from Hone's flying fingers. For a moment, full interest had centered upon Milt Stovall, so Rand studied his hand with special interest.

Hone discarded one. "Cards, gentlemen?"

The planters each took two, Hatfield one. "Play these pat," said Rand. Bets circled the table. It took Rand's stack to stay; he fished out his roll. Hatfield pondered, was tempted and stayed. After another round of bets, the planters quit. Rand and Hatfield and Hone raised back and forth. Rand bought more chips. Reaching for them, he brushed Hatfield's cards, spilling them face up. Four nines and a trey!

John Hatfield turned red, his angry eyes lancing Rand. "You clumsy lout! I hold my first hand all evening and you pull this cheap trick."

"Sorry." Rand felt an inexplicable pity for the little man. "I'll make good what you had in the pot."

"Bah, what of my winnings? If four nines prove high, I demand a cut."

"Very well," said Rand. "All right with you, Hone?"

"No," snapped the gambler. "If he thinks they're good, let him play them."

Hatfield started, sucked a breath and tossed the cards. Still fuming, he watched Rand and Hone raise until there was twenty thousand in the pot. Then Rand saw what he had waited for. He bounced up, shouldered Milt Stovall aside, gripped Hone's wrist.

"Show your cards, tinhorn!" His voice cut like tempered steel. "If you hold more'n five, I'll gut you!"

Hone paled, squirmed but made no play for a weapon. Rand's grip tightened like a vice. The cards dropped—a spade flush, Jack to seven straight, and a red deuce.

"That," said Rand, "makes my four aces good, gentlemen."

"He crooked me too," yelped Milt Stovall. "I make a claim."

The gambler growled, "You weren't in the play."

"That's right," said Rand. "Take your claim to the captain. And you—" he grinned at Hone—"next time, *fullero*, play your luck." He swung Hone to a spinning fall, cashed the chips, swept the bills into his hat and clapped it on. The saloon was still, all eyes on this violence. Captain Berson hurried from his game. "Here, here! What goes on?"

"Sleeve cards, Captain." Rand indicated Hone's hand. "Even Hone won't deny it."

Hatfield, his anger vanished before his obvious good fortune, joined his voice to the claims of the others. Milt Stovall pointed to Rand. "He caught Hone, Captain, but what of his own four aces? Look—in his chair!"

There they were—two damning cards. Berson scowled. A crowd pressed in. A vast silence fell, everybody staring at Rand, whose astonishment turned to swift rage. "You planted those, Stovall! Why? How do you profit?"

"Never mind!" rapped Captain Berson. "Under my rule, I take the bank and all contested stakes. Hearing and settlement in my cabin in an hour, gentlemen. I'll tolerate no cheating here. Those guilty will be put off at the wood camp, around midnight."

Razor Hone rallied. "What could I do, Cap, but fight fire with fire. I intended settling with these other gentlemen, but—" he scowled at Rand—"the guilt is his."

"My cabin, in an hour," repeated Berson, gathering Hone's bank. "Quarternight, I'll take those stakes."

"Sorry, Captain. After the hearing, mebbe. Mebbe not."

Berson swelled. "Sir, you'll hand over if I call the roustabouts."

"Again mebbe. But you won't call 'em."

"And why not?"

The scout grinned. "Because you know I'm framed. And you can't spare the cost—in roustabouts. I'll attend the hearing."

THERE was bitter quarreling in the captain's cabin. Razor Hone, maintaining he had only countered Rand's cheating, stood convicted. From his bank came settlement for the claims of John Hatfield, Milt Stovall and the planters. Hone's charges, backed by the corroboration of the planters, damned Rand.

His temper under control, Rand denied the charge, insisting only Stovall could have planted the spare cards. He refused to deliver his winnings and Berson, chagrined but helpless, was left no other alternative but to set him ashore. It was then John Hatfield tossed his bombshell.

"In fairness, Captain," he said. "I must confess I dropped the cards in Quarternight's chair."

Milt Stovall gasped. Captain Berson spluttered, glaring at the hunchback who stood with one shoulder grotesquely high, leaning on his slender ironwood cane. "Why, sir, do you wait to confess till this hearing is ended?"

"I had money at stake, Captain. Quarternight's claim was paramount unless I could cloud its validity. Cite the case of Hutchins versus McBride, Pike County Court of Claims."

"Damn your citation, Hatfield. Your confession makes your claim false, but it would take a Solomon to decide what to do with the money if I took it from you. The affair stinks. Gather your traps, Hatfield. Off you go with the others."

He waved them out. In the companionway, Hone paused to snarl at Rand. "You robbed me, Quarternight. I'll pay off if it takes half my lifetime."

"Shouldn't take five minutes, Hone. Where'll we go—the boiler deck? How do you want it—fists, knives or guns?"

The gambler stiffened, turned angrily into the saloon. Rand hurried after Hatfield, found him in the lounge, sat beside him. "You didn't plant those cards, man."

The other smiled. "Of course not."

"Then why—"

"You're not stupid, Quarternight. Nor as clumsy as you seemed when you knocked those teasers from my grasp. First I resented it; then I was grateful." His gaze was straight, brave, half worshipful.

Rand grinned. "I see. Returning a favor, eh? Hoping to keep me off the bank."

"The bank's unimportant, Quarternight, unless you're in a hurry. There'll be another packet along. The captain spoke of your sterling reputation; I have no reputation at all. I

thought—well, I felt your reputation should remain unblemished. You've had previous trouble with young Stovall?"

"None. I'm puzzled. What could he gain?"

"Nothing, unless he's in with Hone. Cards promote strange fellowships."

Rand studied. He knew nothing to suggest a tie-up there save the twenty-five thousand dollars. The shoe should be on the other foot unless. . . . Rand recalled Hone's words when Milt had withdrawn. *"Entirely at your service, Stovall. Any amount you say."* River gamblers didn't play against their own money. What did it mean? Had Milt already lost the twenty-five thousand, borrowed more and lost that—maybe on his note?

Rand was wrestling with this when Milt entered the lounge, squiring a handsome, stylish girl too much like him not to be Coralee Stovall. They sought a corner, Milt sulky, Coralee scolding him. Milt's gaze flicked at Rand, jerked away. The scout excused himself and walked over, lithe and at ease, pausing before Milt who kept his eyes lowered.

"Do I rate an explanation, Stovall?"

Milt flared, bounced up. "I explain to no swindler," he choked. "Get your explanation from your chummy hunchbacked crook. If it wasn't for my sister, I'd demand satisfaction."

"Which I'd refuse. I don't war on beardless boys. Get the war out of your neck and let's be friends. Tell me about it. I'll help if you let me."

"Go to hell!" Milt sat down, fuming.

"Milton!" Coralee rebuked him, stood up to challenge Rand with stern hazel eyes. "Suppose you state, Mister Quarternight, what you want my brother to explain."

"He testified against me." Rand admired her fresh beauty and direct courage. "I'd like to know why."

"He's one of your victims, sir. I suppose you gloat over those four aces. Maybe you'll feel better when I tell you you've disgraced this boy and ruined our father's business." Her scorn was withering. "Yes, you and your confederates should feel proud."

"I'm sorry, miss, that your brother didn't use the money as your father intended."

"What do you know about father's intentions?"

"Only what you've just admitted. Milt's not so young he don't know he can't win from the Razor Hones of this world."

"You won, Quarternight."

"I'm no pilgrim, ma'am."

"And yet," she said, coldly, "Captain Berson said you have a reputation for honesty."

"Berson is too kind. After all, they found the cards in my chair."

"Your reputation wasn't worth much, was it?"

"It was quite a pot, Miss Stovall. Gambling's a hard taskmaster."

She held his eyes a long moment and he read her deep courage. "I shouldn't be blaming you," she conceded. "It's nasty business and better forgotten. Come, Milton." Dejectedly they crossed the lounge. Rand, staring after them, felt depressed. As he had feared, Milt had lost the money—maybe more than he had told Coralee. They had boarded the packet at Vicksburg, Rand at Birdseye Landing.

IT WAS raining when the gangplank went out. Rand pulled his hat down, his collar up as he strode ashore, chuckling at Hone's bitter cursing, at the legally phrased philosophy of John Hatfield.

Timber had been hacked from the bank, creating a clearing piled with corded firewood. Farther back, on higher ground, ranged a cluster of cabins, some lighted. Wood-cutters came to watch the loading, among them a bearded boss directing Negro roustabouts trooping off the packet.

The boss' voice stirred Rand visibly. He moved toward the man. And when, in the light of packet spot lamps, fuel was filing aboard and the boss stood by with book and pencil to check the cordage, the scout said, "Hello, Kaintuck."

The oldster whirled. "Well, by the gods! Rand Quarternight! What the hell?"

"Marooned, Kaintuck." Rand gripped the axe-calloused palm of the plainsman and scout in the Mexican war. "Found sleeve cards on me. Clumsy, eh?"

"You?" Skepticism edged the veteran's tone. "Need money that bad, younker?"

"Nope. Had fifteen thousand won in Natchez games. Got twenty-five thousand now." He fell silent, watching Razor Hone cross a beam of light. Kaintuck slapped his leg, chortling.

"I savvy—Razor Hone! One coyote-slick varmint. An' you taken him despite the frame. That's prime; wisht I'd seen it. So Ol' Aaron put you off, eh? Don't worry; the *Andrew Jackson's* due at daybreak. Where headed?"

"Westport. Hear there's new strikes in Colorado an' Nevada. Figgered mebbe to buy equipment an' take a flyer at hauling. How come you're here, cuttin' wood?"

Kaintuck's face fell. "I had yore idee, younker. Actual signed with a Westport outfit, to l'arn the business, save my money an' light out fer myself. I l'arned plenty."

"Tough?"

"Snake crooked. I was with Stovall's Prairie Freight, buckin' Sunset Transportation. One by one, Sunset's busted the independents, plaintin' spies, scampin' equipment, jumpin' trains an' layin' it to the pore Injuns."

"Dirt can be swept, Kaintuck."

"I thought so too, hung on to balk the devilment of Stovall's own manager, Sam Ramage. I'd ready mules for the Trail, only to have the wagons roll behind crowbaits."

"Yeah? What happened?"

"Sunset swapped mules whilst I slept. I soon l'arned Ramage worked fer Sunset though drawin' Stovall pay. Ike Stovall's contractin' levee work down South, trustin' his freight outfit to Ramage. Except for levee profits, he'd be busted. Sunset's a hungry outfit."

"You quit?"

"Fired. I figgered I had to tell Ike's boy, Milt, what I'd l'arned. He give me my walkin' papers. That night I'm jumped by Sunset thugs, beat half to death. So I taken this job. When I've saved enough, I'm goin' back to square accounts fer me an' Ike Stovall."

Rand vetoed the idea of telling Kantuck. "How much you figgerin' to save? How much you got?"

"Got a thousand. Need ten."

"What's wrong with my twenty-five? What we waitin' for?"

Kaintuck looked foolishly skeptical. "You joshin', younker?"

"I'm serious. Ain't had any fun since Mexico. I'll relish a good fight."

"Fight?" The oldster snorted. "This will be war. Sunset's strong. They're out to control the Trail. Odds on, you'll lose yore money."

"So what? I'll tap Razor for more."

"Hoss an' beaver!" Kaintuck threw down book and pencil. "Shake!" They shook and the oldster picked up the book. "Tally them ricks, younker, whilst I gather my plunder." He bowlegged toward the cabins. Presently he returned with a man grumbling about having to work a second shift. Behind Kaintuck straggled sorry-looking characters who held respectfully back. Kaintuck was embarrassed.

"Look, younker," he said, nervously. "Sunset's p'isoned ever' man an' deal in Westport. Can't trust nobody fer nothin'. Here's my bunkies. We kin trust 'em an' they want to j'in us. Old, mostly, stove-up an' glandered, but fightin' fools an' rearin' fer fresh meat."

He listed them off. Funereal Jim Battrick, called Lefty since losing his right hand in the engine room of the old *Mobile City;* rotund Hardwood Potter, clad in faded cavalry tunic, clumping on a peg, relic of Mexican war service; gaunt Beaver Blake, side partner of Kit Carson until a Blackfoot arrow took his left eye; diminutive Cappy Sass, river pilot broken in the early fighting for river supremacy; and lank, towering Californy Pete, a Forty-niner who panned a fortune and settled it on a Hangtown belle who straightway left him. The ensuing knife-fracas had left him with a swivel neck. And as many more.

Rand's spirit was warmed. "It's a blind gamble, boys, with no guarantee the bank can pay off if we win—"

They lifted a cheer and Rand saw John Hatfield limp across a light beam. "Wait, boys. If we buck Sunset, legal advice may come in handy. There's a fair-to-middlin' lawyer—leastwise, I think he is."

Rand took him to one side and they watched the loading. Rand said, "Listen, Hatfield. It's none of my business, but how important is your business upriver?"

"Not very, Quarternight. I own stock in Sunset Transportation, a Westport company. The president, Damon Rossiter, urged me to open a law office in Westport and to handle their business—for stock. Having nothing better, I'm doing so."

"Fine, Hatfield. You've got another client."

"Another?"

"Call it Santa Fe Salvage—overland freight. A gamble against long odds an' a fight to bring out the best that's in a man. . . . You'll not be bored."

The hunchback licked his lips, strove to straighten his frail shoulders. Tragedy quit his eyes. He smiled. "I'm twice in your debt, Quarternight. Grateful I should be thought worthy of such a struggle. I accept the commission. Lead out."

They joined Kaintuck and his forgotten men.

CHAPTER TWO

Men Without Hope

A FEW hours after reaching Westport aboard the *Andrew Jackson,* Rand hired a storeroom, fitting the front for Hatfield's office, the rear as living quarters, with stove, table, chairs, utensils and bunk beds for twelve. The challenge gripped them all, but conditions baffled them, furthering their dependence upon "Little Judge" Hatfield.

Westport was a seething maelstrom of growing congestion. From three directions came men, teams and wagons to this jump-off of the Overland Trail. They were homeseekers and men lusting for gold, freighters, gamblers, adventurers, soldiers. But only cavalrymen were moving westward—attacks upon wagon trains had been charged to Indians. Punitive measures had outraged the tribesmen, who protested by giving themselves to the orgies of the sun dance, smoking the war pipe, painting for battle, and the Army had issued an order closing the trails.

So Westport filled, overflowing onto the flats. Men cursed the Army, but fear held them to obedience. Freighters were hard hit, without business, overhead consuming them. Sunset, financially sound, thanks to stock sales,

saw their securities tumble in value. Rand, worried about the Stovalls, obeyed Hatfield's injunction to wait. One day the lawyer called them together.

"Sunset has been hit a body blow by the Army order," he told them. "Rossiter will be glad to listen, I'm sure, to the idea of combining Sunset and Prairie Freight."

"Combinin'?" Kaintuck snorted. "That's his idee, not our'n."

Rand, too, was disappointed, and the old-timers growled ominously. Hatfield smiled. "Gentlemen, Sunset's incorporated—a hundred thousand shares at a dollar per. Rand won twenty-five thousand shares in a card game. Combine that with the twenty thousand shares I own and we lack only six thousand shares to gain stock control. I understand we can pick up that much cheaply."

"Control, hell!" Kaintuck snapped. "Don't tell me paper will control varmints like Rossiter an' his spies."

"With stock control, we'll take over Sunset, force Rossiter and his men out—"

The day Hatfield took three hundred dollars to buy Sunset stock, Rand and Kaintuck scouted the flats. Wagon flats stretched interminably. Dust pillared as emigrants wheeled in, seeking camps. But, more interesting to Rand and Kaintuck, was the contrast in the corrals of Sunset and Prairie Freight.

Sunset, a show place, hadn't hurt stock sales. In tight sheds, lining one side of the fenced enclosure, hordes of fine mules fed. Along the opposite side were warehouses, graneries, harness rooms, smithy and wheelwright shop, all busy and fully manned. Hay was stacked high at the back. Forty fine wagons were ranged in the compound and at the front, neatly painted, stood the headquarters office.

"See what we're buckin'?" muttered Kaintuck. "Purty, ain't it? Lots o' dinero sunk there."

"You said it, Kaintuck. Got to sell plenty stock to pay for that."

"Stock—humph! Can you see Rossiter quittin' when a humpback lawyer waves papers at him?"

Rand said, "It's worth a try."

They idled the mile to the Prairie corral. Within a straggling crazy fence were a rickety cabin, some decrepit sheds, twenty sad-looking wagons and scores of skinny, hip-shot mules, braying to be fed. No feed anywhere. Drowsy men putting in time.

Kaintuck spat. "That's what we're tryin' to save, younker. It's worse'n when I left. Better if Stovall burned 'er to the sills an' give the land back to the Kaws. Le's go. I can't stand lookin'."

Walking back, Rand was silent, tight-lipped. Right then he felt it better that the bank take over. Stovall could start again with such wagons as he could pick up and mules from the levee work—Prairie Freight didn't seem worth fighting for.

In town, they stopped at a trading company to price wagons. The clerk laughed. "Shuttler, Bain and Studebaker are turning 'em out like a mill but can't half supply the demand. I've got ten wagons due but Rossiter's had 'em bought for months. I could sell a hundred wagons in three hours."

To some, it would have been an invitation to quit. To Rand, it was the clinching argument for saving Prairie. Like his father, he'd never been able to resist a brace game.

At the office, they found the hunchbacked lawyer flushed with excitement. He waved the certificates. "Cost me two-fifty, boys. Tomorrow we'll put the screws to Rossiter. By the way, I hear Stovall's in town, sick in bed."

"Don't blame him." growled Kaintuck. "Made me sick just lookin' at his outfit."

"I better see him," said Rand. "It should do him good to know he's not alone."

"Strict confidence, Rand," counseled the hunchback. "If Rossiter suspects what we're up to, he'll take legal steps to block us."

RAND'S difficulty was not finding the Stovall house, but in entering. Coralee answered his knock, stiffened at sight of him, gasped, "What do you want?"

She wore a flowered dress and apron. Hatless and with dark hair piled high, she seemed fairer than on the *Dixie Belle*, despite the hard fixity of her glance. And Rand knew he meant it when he said, "It's good to see you again, Coralee. I understand your father's home. May I see him?"

She closed the door, stepping onto the porch. Her voice lowered. "Dad's sick. Chills and fever. Doctor says no visitors. Anyway, he's not interested in crooked gamblers."

"This crooked gambler can make him feel better."

Her brows lifted. "How?"

He countered with another question. "Where's Milt?"

"Keep away from him! You've done him enough harm. Good day, Mister Quarternight."

Rand grinned at the door she closed behind her, then turned away. Failure to break down her dislike was regret—like wormwood on his tongue. Moving through the crowding town, Rand heard his name called, spun about and was confronted by Milt Stovall. The younger Stovall was gaunt, his eyes darkly circled. His clothes looked like they'd been slept in.

"Quarternight," he said, "I want a talk."

They moved into a barroom where Milt tossed down a whiskey. Rand ordered his usual lemon soda and then asked, "What's on your mind, Milt?"

"Dad's home, sick. He—told me about you."

"Yeah?"

"That makes a lot of difference. Listen—" he caught Rand's sleeve—"on the *Dixie Belle*, you said you wanted to help me. Did you mean that?"

"Of course."

"I need twenty-five thousand—just for a week."

"The bank?"

"Tomorrow's the last day."

"How do you propose to repay it?"

"I . . . I can't explain that, Quarternight. But you'll get your money."

"Think you're a good risk?"

"You talk like a banker."

"You're trying to make me one, Milt. Or do I look like Santa Claus? Tell me why you planted those cards."

Milt flushed, dropped his eyes. "Later, maybe, not now. If you loan me that money, I'll write a chattel mortgage on Prairie equipment."

"Ike Stovall will sign that?"

"Doctor says no business. Sis and I will sign it. We're his heirs."

"You expect Ike to die, Milt?"

Milt blinked. "He—he's pretty sick, Quarternight. How about the loan?"

"The outfit," mused Rand, "ain't worth twenty-five thousand."

"The wagons are worth that, not to mention the mules."

"Less said about your mules the better. All right, I'll let you have it. Come to my lawyer's office."

But Hatfield frowned on the idea. "It's not wise, Rand. I doubt if the mortgage will bind Ike. And we may need the money."

"If we need more," said Rand, "I'll get it. Draw it up."

Grimly, Hatfield drew the document, making the Stovalls joint mortgagers, Rand the mortgagee. "Make that last Santa Fe Salvage," ordered Rand.

Hatfield smiled, made the change. Rand handed him the money. "Get Coralee's signature and stay with Milt till he turns it over to the bank."

"How come?" queried Kaintuck, when they were gone. "We ain't got enough now to buy cakes if this stock business flitters out."

"This should soften the rebound," said Rand, "if Hatfield's ideas kick back."

In an hour the hunchback came limping back. "Ike Stovall must be pretty sick," he said, "the way that girl guards him. If you've any business with him, you better do it real soon."

"I'll try again tonight," said Rand.

Hatfield brushed it off. "Not that it's likely to matter. Tomorrow we'll be rid of Rossiter and his unholy crew. And Ramage will be hunting a hole."

His confidence failed to move the silent group about the supper table that evening. And Rand was depressed as he struck out for the Stovall home. His rapping brought a girl whose eyes were moist and red and swollen. "You can't see him," she choked. "He's unconscious and the doctor is worried. He won't let dad see you, even though he's asking about you. You're bad medicine for this house, Quarternight. Why can't you let us alone?"

"I guess I couldn't expect you to appreciate making that loan," he flared.

"What's the difference? You or the bank—it's all the same. You're both out to get yours."

"If that's how you feel," snapped Rand, "maybe it's still not too late to draw out. Can Milt get the cash back from the bank?"

"I don't know. He tells me little of his business."

"Where is he?"

"He went to supper with Mister Hone."

"Hone? That tinhorn?" Rand was astonished. "And you let him?"

"Milton won't mind me. Anyway, this was business, not gambling."

"Hone not gambling?" He eyed her pityingly. "You don't know him. Where'd they go?"

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

"The Palace. You don't think—"

But Rand was already moving away, striding swiftly uptown towards the Palace Cafe.

THE Palace cashier shrank from Rand's smoldering rage. No, she didn't know the men he mentioned, but when he described them, she pointed. "Third private room back, on the left."

Rand weaved among the tables. Reaching the third door back, he kicked the door in, then stopped short, staring. Beside an overturned table, two bloody men lay on the floor—Milt Stovall and Razor Hone. Milt lay limp and quiet. Hone rose dazedly to a sitting posture, blinking, muttering, pointing out the window.

"He—came in there—slugged me!" Hone struggled up, exploring his pockets. "Robbed. Every cent gone!"

Rand studied him a moment, then knelt beside Milt. The boy was alive but cruelly beaten. His clothing had been ripped, apparently to get at a money belt. His pockets were turned out.

A waiter entered, freezing, staring as Rand snapped at him. "You help Hone clean up and show me a way out back. I'll take care of the bill and get young Stovall to a doctor."

A few minutes later he was carrying Milt down a dark lane toward his quarters. Surrounded by men long skilled in rough surgery, Rand found no need for a doctor. With cool water and Valley Tan, Milt soon came around. His scalp was split. His nose trickled blood and he complained of a bruised neck. But loss of his money belt hit him hardest. "I—I'm no good," he moaned. "No damn good."

Rand looked askance at the hunchback, who said, "He passed it through the wicket, Rand. I saw him."

"I withdrew it," confessed the miserable youngster.

"And went back to let the horse kick you a second time. Why?"

"I—the bank extended the time thirty days, because of the Army order. Hone showed me how to double it in that time, so—"

"Double your money in thirty days?" Rand laughed bitterly. "Leave that to our friend Hone."

"It's true. Sunset preferred stock. Through his influence, Rossiter was willing to part with some. Soon as the Trail's open, it will double—"

"Investing in your competitor, who never has and never will pay a dividend," mourned Hatfield.

"Hone took you again, Milt," said Rand. "First he used sleeve cards. This time it was a club. Describe the man who jumped you."

"I—I had only a glimpse. He was tall, heavy, with a sack pulled over his head."

"Built like Ramage?"

"That's crazy. Ramage would have no reason—"

"Twenty-five thousand is reason enough, Milt. Hone and Ramage have that money. I'm sure. You game to go after it?"

Milt drew himself up. Color was beginning to seep into his cheeks. "I'm game," he said hoarsely. "If Ramage robbed me, I—I'll kill him. But my gun—" He patted his empty holster.

"Easy," Rand said. He borrowed a gun from Hatfield, jammed it into Milt's holster. "Thing for us to do now is to find Hone and Ramage together. Come on."

He led the way out, Milt matching strides, lips tight and shoulders back. Together, they made the rounds of the gambling places, without result. Rand was doubtful of his own judgment when they entered the El Dorado and talked with the garrulous bartender.

"Hone? Yeah, I know him." He looked them up and down. "He's sure got the honey that draws suckers. If I had it, I'd quit tendin' bar. Hone's got a private game back yonder." He pointed, dropping one eyelid. "Nothing for a careful man, gents."

"Thanks." Rand steered the way past flourishing games and into a corridor. He paused before a door, through which struck coarse laughter, tinkle of glassware, rattle of chips. He was conscious of Milt's fast breathing. "It may be rugged, Kid. You watch the door an' keep 'em off my back."

Milt, listening hard, grasped his arm. "You're right!" he whispered. "Sam's in there with Hone, Rossiter and Bill Gard, Sunset manager. Sam's bragging about slugging me."

He surprised Rand by palming up his pistol, opening the door. Some magical alchemy held him in its arms as he stepped into the smoke-filled room, standing aside for Rand to enter. His grim, drawn face revealed a strange new deadliness.

At the poker layout, four men swiveled to the intrusion. Burly Sam Ramage half rose, face darkening. "Milt! What's wrong? Your father—?"

"Not dad." Milt's voice was rough, strained. "You played it nice, Sam, but you chose the wrong pilgrim."

Ramage straightened, shifted his gaze to Rand, who stared fixedly at Razor Hone, who sat unmoving, poker-faced. Rand said: "Shell out, Razor!" And when the gambler made no move: "The blood was pretty, tinhorn, but next time at least scratch yourself to account for it."

Ramage swore. "You damned bungler," he flung at Hone.

Rand laughed, measuring the tall stacks before Hone and Ramage. "You ain't so smart

yourself, Sam. Not even a sheet would hide your barrel shape. Cash twelve fifty from each of their banks, Rossiter, and hand me the money."

The Sunset boss, an elegant man, sharp featured with shrewd, calculating eyes, pursed thin lips and said: "What's this all about, Hone?"

"Hold-up," snapped the gambler. "What you think?"

"Second within an hour," snapped Rand. "This pair put the slug on Milt and took twenty-five hundred. And you know all about it, Rossiter. Count it out!"

"If you do, Damon," rapped Ramage, "it's on you."

RAND grasped Rossiter's chair, tipped it and the Sunset boss was out of his way. He leaped at Ramage, who was stabbing for his gun. Rand hit him, knocking him across his chair to a sprawling fall. Following up, he stomped Sam's gun wrist, kicked his weapon into a corner.

Ramage lunged up, reeled against the wall as Rand struck again, bounced off, battling. Rand pounded his face, backing him against a sideboard which upended, dumping bottles and glasses. Ramage braced, managing to stay erect. And from the door, Milt called: "No gunplay! I'll kill the man who draws!"

Rand's charge rocked the room and the boom of his fist echoed large against Ramage's answering grunt. They locked, bulling each other about, slugging fiercely. The initiative was Rand's, his fists battering through the other's guard, holding him back to the wall.

Rand missed, slipped to one knee. Ramage blanketed him, pinning his arms. For seconds there was only labored breathing, then Ramage braced, heaved, hurled Rand to the floor and leaped to pin him. Rand rolled and got away from a kick, and then tackled the other's knees. He got his legs under him, heaved, and Ramage crashed across the room.

Ramage's breath was out of him when Rand landed on him once more. Milt's voice came to him dimly at last.

"He's out," warned Milt. "You're killing him."

It dug into Rand's consciousness and he dragged himself erect. He glared at Rossiter. "You next—or do you count it out?"

"I've got no choice," said the Sunset boss, and nervously counted the amount from Razor Hone's black japanned box. That source was significant. No further word was spoken as Rand accepted the money, turned and went out. Milt closed the door behind him. Side by side, they crossed the busy barroom and found the street.

"There'll be hell to pay," muttered Milt.

"Yeah?"

"Ramage won't swallow this. You'll be a target. And me too."

"Then you do know what Ramage is, eh?"

Milt laughed sourly. "Nobody knows better. But what could I do? They pressured me into their schemes, forced me to risk dad's money on the *Dixie Belle* and withdraw yours to invest in Sunset stock. I've been in a split stick."

"Too scairt to rebel?

"Scared to sign a death warrant for dad and Sis."

"Ramage used the same pressure on Coralee, eh?"

"Sure. He—he forced her to become engaged to him. She didn't dare refuse him and doom dad and me. We never could see an out, not one."

"Not even when your dad told you about me?"

"We thought of it, but didn't dare tell you. That—that's why sis talked to you like she did."

They were nearing the Stovall house and Milt was visibly affected. Rand wasn't surprised. His only doubt was how much was bluff, how much real menace lay in the situation. Rossiter had too much at stake to be squeamish, but would he willfully slaughter the Stovalls?

"Got guns at home, Milt?"

"Plenty. And ammunition. Long ago, we decided it might come to that."

"Your dad knows about it?"

"Only that something's wrong. We knew if we told him he'd rear up and get himself killed. Prairie's not worth that."

"I'll say not. Don't tell Ike. Stay close and nurse him. I'll post a guard here, just in case. An' I'll keep this money until the thirty-day extension's up."

Leaving Milt at his door, Rand headed back. He hadn't covered a hundred steps along the darkened street when shadows leaped at him. He halted, reached for his gun and was struck from behind by a hurtling shoulder, knocked down. He rolled and came up, drawing. Someone struck him behind the knees, dumping him again. He threw up his arms. A club took him behind the ear, stunning him.

Fighting oblivion, Rand saw the glitter of naked steel. Then, quite as suddenly, it was withdrawn. There were muttered curses and he felt a muted concussion. A heavy weight fell atop him. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Into the Wolf Den

HE CAME alive, battling. He struck at a face swimming before him, rolled twice and came to his knees, gun palmed. Someone

croaked: "Hey, look out! The younker's loco! Duck!"

Rand let the hammer down, came up. "Kaintuck!"

"You danged badger, you want to smoke yore friends?" The plainsman advanced gingerly, followed by three others who had scattered. Cappy Sass, Beaver Blake and Californy Pete. "Lucky we follered you, son. Them coyotes was guttin' you when we smoked 'em a batch." He indicated a still shape on the ground. "One's finished with devilment. Here comes gents drawed by the shootin.' Hightail!"

They faded into the blackness, avoided the street and came presently to their quarters. Hatfield was waiting there and asked, "Did you get the money, Rand?"

"I did." Rand patted his pocket. "An' since Milt arranged a thirty-day extension, I'm keeping it." He told them about Milt and his sister, assigned Cappy, the runt, and the giant Beaver to guard the Stovalls.

Afterwards Hatfield said, "After tomorrow, we won't worry about Rossiter's thugs. They'll be looking for another meal ticket. I meet Rossiter at eleven."

"Where?" asked Rand.

"Sunset corrals."

Rand grimaced. "You'll be a rabbit in a wolf den. I'll go along."

"We better all go—double heeled," growled Kaintuck.

"Look here," barked the lawyer. "We want no violence. Rossiter must realize from the first that he's up against the law. Force won't get us anywhere."

Kaintuck growled that Sunset had gone places with force and a general argument ensued. Finally it was agreed that Rand should accompany Hatfield, the oldsters following in case they hadn't returned to headquarters within three hours.

Next morning, after breakfast, Californy Pete and Hardwood were sent to relieve Cappy and Beaver, who reported a boresome watch. The forenoon dragged. At ten, a horseman came thundering up the street, whooping and yelling glad tidings. "Army lifts the ban! Wagons away—Monday!"

Three days. Men of Santa Fe Salvage rushed to the street, where Westport was going wild. Yells shuddered against the fronts. Men danced and capered. A swift rush swamped the barrooms, where countless toasts celebrated the unshackling of a mighty traffic. Men and women serpentined in hysterical parades. Through this tumult, fated to last all day and all night, Rand and Hatfield set out for showdown with Rossiter, the hunchback setting a hippering pace, cane tapping on the boardwalk.

Behind them, the derelicts eyed one another. Nobody spoke. As if by signal, they formed by two's, threatening the crowds toward the flats.

Rand and Hatfield were admitted to Rossiter's sumptuous office by a timid clerk. The Sunset boss sat behind a polished table, surrounded by luxury, a fifty-cent *Habana* screwed into his mouth. He was beaming, friendly, his hand-grip strong and warm.

"You're prompt, Judge Hatfield; I like that. Quarternight—ah, yes. Have seats, gentlemen."

"Rossiter," began Little Judge, "I represent your majority stockholders."

"Yes?" Rossiter smiled, pressed his fingertips together. "In what capacity, Hatfield?"

"As legal counsel. My clients are dissatisfied with your trusteeship."

"Indeed." Rossiter's was a nerveless, unshakeable calm. He canted his head, peering at them with a cold, dead glance. "I thought I'd done well with the business. What is the indictment?"

"Waste, extravagance, prodigality." Hatfield gestured. "This office is an example. Then there's your brutal preying upon competitors, building lasting enmities."

"Ah-h-h." Rossiter faced up, blowing rings. "Do I detect Ike Stovall's hand behind this, gentlemen?"

"The majority stockholders are behind it, Rossiter."

"How many shares do you represent, Hatfield?"

"Fifty-one thousand."

Rossiter smiled. "And now that you have control, what next?"

"We will organize. You will resign or be forced out."

"Really?" He was laughing again as he spun his chair, opened a drawer and pulled out stock certificates, bales of them. "Here," he gloated, "is many times your so-called control. I personally own five hundred and sixty thousand shares."

Little Judge started. "The record shows you incorporated for one hundred thousand shares. If there are more—"

"A million shares more, Hatfield." Rossiter grinned hugely.

"Failure to list them is illegal, Rossiter."

"Legal matters annoy me. A suit? Bring it. I'll block you for five years. If you hang on that long, you're welcome to Sunset. I'll have mine made."

Rand knew the revulsion a snake inspires. He asked quietly, "Betting your stack on that, Rossiter?"

"Why not? It's a sure thing." Rossiter's face grew rigid. "Listen— I'm miles ahead of you. Hatfield, I had a place for you, could have made you rich. But you chose defunct Prairie Freight. Well—you made your bed."

The hunchback said, with dignity. "I wouldn't swap."

Rossiter toyed with the big diamond on his finger. "There's no reason for not telling you now. Today the situation broke. The Army declared the Trail open Monday. Government haul is the meat and bones of the Trail business at this time. Supplies for Forts Larned, Lyons and Union. Spreading that haul has failed. The government is awarding the exclusive contract to the outfit getting a shipment through intact and in the best time. A race, you understand? Everybody will have his chance. With the best mules and the toughest men, I'll not lose."

"Traitors and spies," said Rand, coldly. "And mules you've stolen. At that, you may be surprised."

Rossiter smiled. "You're thinking of Stovall's levee mules, Quarternight. He's shipping them north on the old *Iriquois*. My men are now at Pigeon Island to take over that packet. Those mules will power my new wagons."

Rand said, "Thanks for telling us. It will mean grief for your pirates, Rossiter."

He was rising slowly, his scorn falling across an uneasy silence. Then he exploded into sudden action. He kicked back his chair, swerved, turned the big table. It carried Rossiter down. Rand's ivory-butted Colt's came out, tilted, flamed death upward. From the skylight above came a shot that missed, a scream, crashing glass and a body tumbling. A dead man teetered a moment on the edge of the upturned table, then slid to the floor.

Outside the office a yell lifted, shrill and savage, followed by thundering bootsteps. Rand pivoted, slid his chair to the door and hooked it under the knob. Behind him Hatfield hollered: Look out!"

Again Rand spun, sensing his danger but unprepared for what he saw. Rossiter had squirmed from under the wreckage, his gun spitting flame. A slug nicked Rand's side, unbalancing his aim. Hatfield was moving, spindly legs driving his warped body. His cane, uplifted in both hands, against Rossiter's gun.

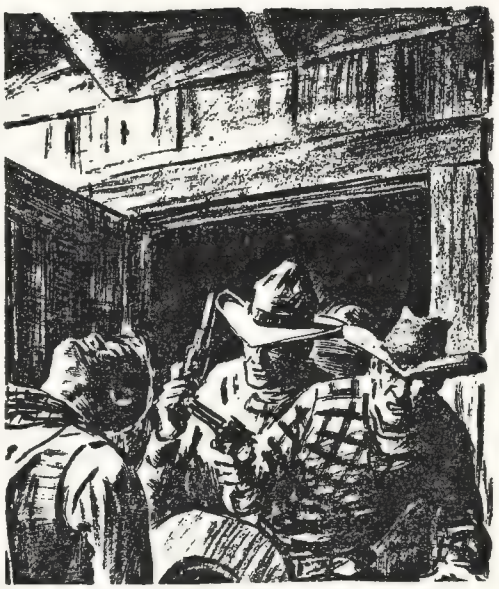
Striving to right himself, Rand shouted: "No, Hatfield! Stay back!"

Before the words were out, the lawyer's cane came apart. From its heart flashed a slender, silvery blade. Rossiter swung his revolver. The rapier met his gun arm, struck through and came free for another thrust. Rossiter screamed, fell back to reach for his fallen weapon with his left hand. Rand's gun roared, spewing streaks of fire through the haze. Rossiter died with Little Judge's steel in his throat, Rand's bullet through his heart.

The braced door buckled, groaned, bent under an onslaught from outside. Rand threw a shot through it. A cry of pain answered and pressure relaxed. A shadow darkened the window and Rand hit the floor. Hatfield, standing beside the crashing pane, thrust his blade through the neck of the aiming gunman, who wilted across the sill. Hatfield picked up the man's gun and sheathed the wicked secret of his cane.

Then, over the din outside, came Kaintuck's roar, "Hoss an' Beaver! Square fer Rand an' Little Judge in polecat blood!"

Rand leaped for the door, with Hatfield right behind him. He jerked out the brace, disengaged the ram and whipped the door open, gun ready. But the oldsters had cleared



the outer office. Three Sunset men lay dead. The rest had dived out the windows. Kaintuck stood brandishing a smoking Colt, long legs spread, swaying a little, his cut scalp draining blood into his whiskers.

THE old-timers of Santa Fe Salvage were flushed with victory, minded to celebrate, as all Westport celebrated. But the mental agony of Hatfield restrained them. Rossiter was dead, but that offered no immediate hope for Prairie Freight. The legal way had failed —and where did this latest violence leave them?

"From now on," said Hatfield, "you won't need a lawyer as much as a leader. It's up to you, Rand. I'll confess the shooting and take the consequences. In the meantime, you must remove Ramage and his men from Prairie Freight. See Ike Stovall about the haul and I'll verify that new Army order."

"There must be a better way," murmured Rand, but he couldn't see one. It was dog eat dog now, with fine strategy behind them.

Yet ten men were none too many to challenge Sunset's play at Pigeon Island. Four more were needed to guard the Stovalls. An attack must be organized against Ramage. At least twenty men would be needed to man the Stovall wagons. There was much to do and little time to do it in.

They made swift plans. The derelicts were to split, make the rounds of Westport saloons, recruiting teamsters and fighting men. While Little Judge sought information regarding the loading of government supplies, Rand must contrive to see Ike Stovall.

Leaving Hatfield at the Office of Army Procurement, Rand threaded the throng to the Stovall house. He saw Hardwood coming far off, his peg-leg clumping, the buttons of his Army tunic straining as his chest swelled with excitement. His jaws worked furiously on a huge cud of twist.

"It's bin peaceable as a church hayride," he barked, from a rod away. "But now the Stovalls has a visitor. Meaty gent with two guns. Busted in without a how-de-do or go to hell. Ramage, likely, an' he's stirrin' up a rumpus. Californy's watchin' to see he don't git too rough."

"Come on," said Rand, softly, and walked away from the humping veteran. The Cherokees had taught him to stride like that. Approaching the house, he saw Californy sitting under a tree, across the street. He heard clashing voices, paused outside the door to listen. Ike Stovall railed angrily.

". . . . and my mind's made up. You're fired. I came home to learn why Prairie Freight's only gobbled money. I learned plenty. I trusted you, Sam, gave you a free hand an' agreed you could marry Coralee. All the while you laughed up your sleeve, robbed me, sold me out to Sunset."

"I've heard enough." Ramage's voice thundered. "You're old an' sick or I'd ram them words down yore neck, Ike. I've explained our bad luck—Injun raids, fire, stock stole, wagons swept down the Arkinsaw, losses to make good—"

"Lies!" Milt Stovall's voice crackled. "The goods you claim went down the Arkansas turned up in Las Vegas—delivered by Sunset."

Ramage growled ominously. "Listen, sprout! Don't cross me too fur or—"

"I'll have you jailed!" yelled Ike Stovall. "I'll—"

"Try it, Ike. Rossiter will bail me out. Before the case is called, I'll be Sunset manager in Santa Fe. An' git this—Coralee's goin' with me."

He spun about, blinking as Rand entered. Rand grinned at the battle bruises on the man's face, looked past him at the Stovalls. Ike stood white, trembling, in his night-shirt; Milt stood braced, lips tight, hand near his gun. Coralee sat on a sofa, white and frightened.

Rand said easily, "Lower your voice, Ramage; nobody's deaf. Coralee, do you want to go to Santa Fe with this man?"

"Not if he was the last man on earth."

"Then you'll not have to."

"She's promised," spluttered Ramage. "You or no other man kin stop—"

"I stopped you last night. I'll stop you again. Ike fired you; that goes. Get your traps an' coyotes out of the Stovall corral before morning. An' if you scamp so much as a singletree, I'll skin you alive."

"Yeah? Ike can't fire me; I've quit. Hear me, all of you! You'll hub plenty hell buckin' Sunset an' Rossiter."

"Rossiter's dead." Rand spoke calmly. "I killed him, Ramage. I'll kill you if you bother Prairie Freight further. Get out!"

Ramage glared, brushed his lips with a dry tongue. Then he wheeled and strode past Rand and quit the house. Ike Stovall groaned, slumped into a chair. "I'm sure glad to see you, Rand. That—"

Rand got down to business. "When do those mules get here, Ike?"

"Tomorrow. And none too soon. You know about the race?"

"I know. But Sunset's stopping the *Iriquois* at Pigeon Island, taking your animals. I'm taking steps to block them. Do me a favor."

"Anything, Rand. Name it."

"Name me manager of Prairie Freight."

Tears popped into Stovall's eyes. He dashed them away. "That's a favor to me, son. You're it, on your own terms. Can you get men? Need money? I've got thirty thousand, advance on my levee outfit, with as much again due in ninety days."

"I'll call on you if I need it, Ike. Leave details to me. You've twenty wagons in the corral. I'll load ten with Army supplies. What about haul for the rest?"

"I've got a contract with Great Western Mercantile, Rand. They're discouraged, but—"

"We'll have to build back confidence, Ike."

Milt said: "I'll fix it with Great Western, Rand. Come back tonight and I'll have all the information. But the race—you think there's any use?"

"Of course. We'll win it if we get those mules. Everything hangs on that."

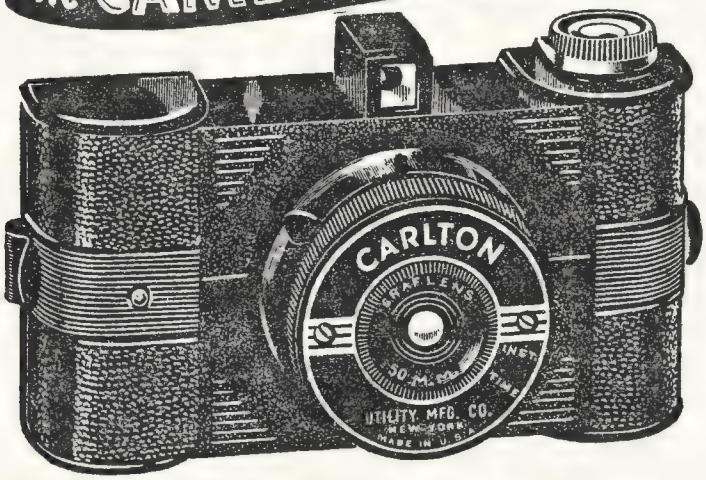
Ike Stovall rose, held out a trembling hand. "Thank God for a friend like you, Rand. Without you, we'd be—" He faltered, choked and tottered into the bedroom, Coralee assisting him.

To Milt, Rand said, "Don't drop your guard, Kid. Rossiter's death may stop Sunset, but don't bet on it. Keep your eyes peeled."

Milt nodded grimly. From the sick room,

While Supply Lasts!

The CAMERA BARGAIN of a Lifetime!



Now Only $3.98 CARRYING CASE FREE!

The Ideal Gift for Mother, Dad, Sis or Brother

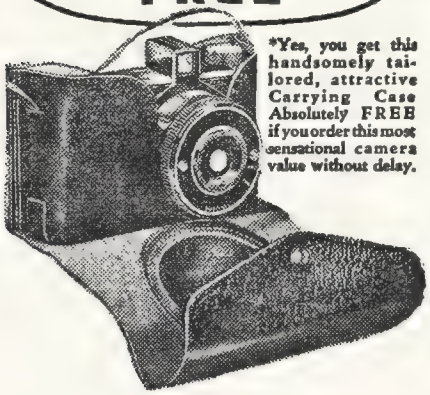
★

Sold On Money-Back "No Risk" Guarantee of Satisfaction

LOOK At These Features

- ★ **Takes Excellent Full Color Pictures Indoors or Outdoors**
- ★ **Genuine Graf Lens**
- ★ **Extremely Simple To Operate**
- ★ **Level View Finder**
- ★ **Takes 16 Pictures On Any Standard Number 127 Film**
- ★ **Fine Quality Precision Construction**

This Handsome **CARRYING CASE *FREE**



*Yes, you get this handsomely tailored, attractive Carrying Case Absolutely FREE if you order this most sensational camera value without delay.

DON'T PASS UP THIS SENSATIONAL SCOOP VALUE!

Imagine getting a genuine Carlton Candid Camera for only $3.98 in the face of one of the most drastic camera shortages in our nation's history! And please don't let our low close-out price lead you to believe that this is "just another cheap camera." To the contrary, it's a precision made instrument created by one of the largest camera manufacturers in the world. Yes our Carlton Candid Camera looks, acts and performs like many cameras costing as high as ten dollars in peace time, and possesses many features you have to see to appreciate. We absolutely guarantee the Carlton to take beautiful, clear, sharp pictures in either color or black and white — pictures that will thrill you or your money back. All we ask is that you act quickly because the quantity is limited and it's "first come—first served." So order at once and avoid disappointment later. DO IT NOW AND GET HANDSOME CARRYING CASE FREE!

SEND NO MONEY—RUSH COUPON TODAY

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. CL1
608 So. Dearborn St.—Chicago 5, Ill.

Please send me a genuine Carlton Candid Camera and Free Carrying Case—all for only $3.98

CHECK ONE

☐ Send C.O.D.—I will pay Postman $3.98 plus postage. ☐ Enclosed find $3.98 in full payment postpaid.

Name_____
Please Print Clearly
Address_____
City_____ State_____

New Hospital-Surgical Policy

Offered by Old Established Life Insurance Co.

Only $1.00 A Month

(Small Additional Charge Will Include Entire Family)

You, as an individual, or your entire family (ages 3 months to 75 years) will be mailed actual policy, made out in your own name, for 10 days' free inspection, if request is received during this introductory offer.

SEEING IS BELIEVING! This new policy differs from any now offered. It provides $1,000; accidental death or dismemberment; 90 days' hospitalization, up to $5.00 a day for room and board. Pays $50.00 for childbirth. Allows extra benefits for surgical operations; X-Ray; anesthesia; laboratory examination; operating room; medicine and drugs; and ambulance service. Emergency draft benefit included. Policy is good in any accredited hospital.

SEND NO MONEY! Just write—giving name and address, date of birth, height, weight, race or color, and condition of health for last five years, of yourself—and each member of your family to be included. Actual policy will be mailed you for free inspection.

NO AGENT WILL CALL! Due to man-power shortage and gas rationing, this new policy has been created for the benefit of those who can think and act for themselves, and save by mail. No doctor's examination! Write NOW!

American Life & Accident Insurance Co.

231-A American Life Bldg. St. Louis 8, Mo.

Asthma Mucus
Loosened First Day
For Thousands of Sufferers

If choking, gasping, wheezing, recurring attacks of Bronchial Asthma rob you of sleep and energy, accept this liberal trial offer. Get Mendaco, a doctor's prescription, from your druggist; take exactly as directed and see for yourself how quickly it usually helps loosen and remove thick strangling mucus, thus promoting freer breathing and refreshing sleep. You be the judge. Unless delighted and entirely satisfied with results, simply return the empty package and your money back is guaranteed. Don't suffer another night without trying guaranteed Mendaco—only 60c.

LAW

LEARN AT HOME

Are you adult, alert, ambitious, willing to study? Investigate LAW! We guide you step by step—furnish all texts, including 14-volume Law Library. Training prepared by leading law professors and given by members of bar. Degree of LL.B. conferred. Low cost, easy terms. Send NOW for Free, 48-page "Law Training for Leadership."

LASALLE Extension University
A CORRESPONDENCE INSTITUTION
417 S. Dearborn St., Dept. 3334-L, Chicago 5, Ill.

Coralee came with a new humility. "Can you ever forgive me, Rand?"

He took her hand—and afterwards he didn't quite know how it happened—but suddenly she was in his arms, face upturned, lips pressed fiercely against his. "Bless you," she breathed, then tore from his grasp and flew to her room. Rand felt his lips, unbelieving, then grinned at the goggling Milt and left.

BACK at his headquarters, Rand found some of the men back with recruits: Two farmer boys from beyond Ohio, two stony-faced Yankees, a trapper from the 'Cajun country, and a couple of nondescript Easterners—adventurous youths caught in a swirling tide, all asking only the chance to shove westward.

Even while Rand interviewed them, Beaver, Cappy and Lefty came in with more. By mid-afternoon the company had swelled to twenty-nine. Rand eyed the newcomers with mixed emotions. A motley lot, with nothing but faith.

He split his wood-camp derelicts into two groups. Beaver, Cappy, Lefty and the pair guarding the Stovalls were to remain with him in Westport, with five recruits. Kaintuck was to lead the rest down-river to meet the Sunset challenge and bring up the mules.

There were arms to be purchased, passage to be arranged. For a hundred dollars the captain of a small packet agreed to deck the eighteen passengers, leave at once and whistle down the *Iriquois*. Rand watched them go with mixed feelings. He wished he could go with them, for on their success hinged the fate of Prairie Freight. Against that, such success would avail them nothing if Ramage decided to hold the corral. Rand more than half believed he would. That would mean another decisive encounter.

Upon his return to the office, Rand found Hatfield pleased and talkative.

"Marshal wouldn't bother with me," the hunchback announced. "Jail's full and he's had five killings today. There's no report of Rossiter's death, no complaint. He suggested I see Judge Parent. The court calendar allowed him to hear me. Rossiter's been up six times this year, bringing pressure on the court each time. The judge don't mourn him. He accepted my plea of guilty, fined me a hundred dollars for manslaughter, gave me a year in jail and suspended the sentence." Hatfield chuckled. "Now I can't be tried on the charge, or nobody else. Luck of Santa Fe Salvage, Rand. If it holds, we'll do all right. What about the mules?"

Rand told him, and that evening headed for the Stovall's, taking Cappy and Beaver to spell the guards.

Again Coralee answered Rand's knock. At sight of him, she paled, tried to say something and couldn't.

Then Ramage's voice lashed out.

"Don't draw, Quarternight! There's your man, Marshal."

Starlight glinted off leveled pistols as Ramage, his followers and a tall man wearing a badge moved into the light splashing out the doorway. "You're under arrest," barked the lawman, "for murdering Damon Rossiter."

"He swore he'd do it," added Ramage. "An' glaum Prairie Freight, even if he had to kill the Stovalls. You all right, Coralee? Milt? Your father?"

"All right," said the girl, "thanks to Mister Quarternight. My father's sick in bed. Please be quiet."

As if in answer, a shuddering moan came from the sick room, followed by Milt's shout. "Sis—dad! See what he wants; I'll be right in."

Coralee darted back. The deputy moved warily toward Rand. "Surrendering peaceable, Quarternight, or—"

Coralee's scream cut him off. Rand whirled, lunged across the threshold, the deputy and his informers following. In the sick room a turned-down light shone wanly on the girl, kneeling there, cradling Ike Stovall's head in her arms, weeping.

CHAPTER FOUR

Santa Fe Salvage Goes to War

ONE glance told Rand. A knife wound in Ike's stilled chest spread its tell-tale stain and marble pallor grayed the face of the man who, long ago, had risked life to save Runnels Quarternight from Vigilantes.

Rand raised the sobbing girl, drew her away. Milt came from a rear room, his face lathered, razor in hand. His eyes clung to the slain man, in whose nerveless hand was still gripped the handle of a small valise. He muttered: "Robbed, too. They got his money—thirty thousand!"

"That right?" the deputy said, helplessly.

"This is Quarternight's work!" rapped Ramage, venomously.

"You lie!" Coralee swung to face him. "I was with dad when Rand knocked. The curtains were falling into place when I returned. The killer went—" She pointed out the open window, through which struck a sudden hoarse hail—Beaver Blake's Injun yell.

A gun snarled. Then two pistols spoke as one—then silence and slow boot echoes and Beaver's voice. "Got one of them killers,

STOP Scratching

Relieve Itch in a Jiffy

Sufferers from the torturing itch caused by eczema, pimples, scales, scabies, athlete's foot, "factory" itch, and other itch troubles, are praising cooling, liquid **D.D.D. Prescription.** This time-proved medication—developed by Dr. D.D. Dennis—positively relieves that cruel, burning itch. Greaseless and stainless. Soothes and comforts even the most intense itching in a jiffy. A 35c trial bottle proves its merits or your money back. Ask your druggist today for **D. D. D. Prescription.**

How To Relieve Bronchitis

Creomulsion relieves promptly because it goes right to the seat of the trouble to help loosen and expel germ laden phlegm, and aid nature to soothe and heal raw, tender inflamed bronchial mucous membranes. Tell your druggist to sell you a bottle of Creomulsion with the understanding you must like the way it quickly allays the cough or you are to have your money back.

CREOMULSION
for Coughs, Chest Colds, Bronchitis

MEN

This Horseshoe Ring, Handmade, Hand-engraved, inlaid with simulated pearl, is KNOCK-OUT! Shoe and shank of everlasting Monel Metal is

GUARANTEED 20 YEARS

Supply is limited . . . rush your order! SEND NO MONEY. Pay Postman only $3.85, plus excise tax and postage. Return for refund in five days if not delighted. State size. Address:

AMERICAN JEWELRY CO. Dept. 159-H Wheeling, W. Va.

High School Course at Home — Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dpt. H-349, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

POEMS WANTED

Collaborate with the nationally famous hit composer of "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," "When the Bloom is on the Sage" and over 300 others. Send your poems today for free examination and liberal offer.

SCREENLAND RECORDERS, Dept. P, Hollywood 28, Calif.

WELCOME RELIEF FROM ASTHMATIC ATTACKS

• For more than 75 years, people have relied upon Dr. Guild's GREEN MOUNTAIN ASTHMATIC COMPOUND to get welcome relief from asthmatic misery. 24 cigarettes, only 50¢. Powder, 25¢ and $1.00 at nearly all drug stores. Write today for FREE SAMPLE. The J. H. Guild Co., Dept. K-2, Rupert, Vermont. Use only as directed on package.

gents. One got away. Hello—Razor Hone has made his last gamble, playin' a dead man's cards!"

Sam Ramage suddenly went white about the lips. He leveled a finger at Rand. "His men was posted outside, Marshal. Our comin' give 'em their chance to kill Ike. Arrest him!"

"I'll have to take you in, Quarternight," said the lawman. "Ramage swore out a warrant, naming you as Rossiter's killer."

"He's as wrong there, Marshal, as about Stovall. Hatfield pleaded guilty to killing Rossiter, this afternoon, was convicted and sentenced. Ask Judge Parent, Marshal. If I'm wrong, I'll hand you my guns an' quit the game. Not otherwise."

"That goes as she lays, gents." Beaver and Cappy Sass appeared at the window. "That crook, Hone, wore Rossiter's collar, same as Ramage."

"I'll kill you for that!" Ramage threw his hand to holster.

Two guns flipped across the sill. "Try it!" grinned Beaver. "Just one teeny try, Sam!"

The marshal stepped between them. He scowled at Ramage. "It's plain you spoke out of turn, Ramage. If that warrant is perjury, you'll sweat; if I tie you to this murder, you'll hang. The way she sets now, you've got a heap of provin' to do. Let's go." Later, alone with Milt, Rand said, "You're the head of Prairie Freight now, Milt. And all Coralee's got."

"I know." Milt was grim. "That race, Rand—it's our last hope now."

"I'll handle that, Milt. You take care of this end. Wonder why Ike didn't put that money in the bank?"

Milt flushed. "My fault. He couldn't trust me. He was waiting until he felt better."

"It's spilt milk," said Rand. "Tonight we'll take over the corrals. Tomorrow I'll give you half the money I've got left, an' you better nurse it. At least it will buy hay and grub till we cash in on this run. That should be in time to cover the bank loan."

"I'll refinance," gritted the youth. "Retire the loan an' clear the chattel mortgage."

"Forget that, Milt. If I need money, I'll get it. I'll tear up the mortgage, but I want a partnership."

"Partnership?" Milt was flabbergasted.

"For the men of Santa Fe Salvage. They'll earn it, Milt. Without them, you're sunk. They all like to believe they're part of the outfit. Is that unfair?"

"Yes—unfair to you, and them. Whatever we amount to, your Santa Fe Salvage will have made from nothing. . . .

He wrung Rand's hand, hurried away to find Coralee.

A scimitar moon peeked between scudding clouds in the west. Lightning flashed. Thunder muttered across the river. A sharp wind swept the flats, whipping wagon camps and bottomland timber with clouds of dust, as Santa Fe Salvage marched to war.

Rand and Beaver set a stiff pace. The plan was well rehearsed. Hardwood and Lefty, each with a recruit, headed for the west and north fences, respectively. Cappy, more agile, was to top the sheds to the east, with one man. Rand, with Beaver, Californy and a recruit would attack from the south.

Seconds ticked into minutes. A night hawk whistle came from the west—then from the north. When Cappy's signal came, Rand hooted once and saw his men, spaced a rod apart, move swiftly to the fence. Rand, with gun high, was straddling the fence when a wire caught his throat. A jangle of bells lifted.

Rand sent his weight against the strand, parted it and entered the compound, abandoning caution. The jangle still sounded and warning broke from the shadows, high and angry. Gunflame split the night. A bullet smacked the fence. "Get 'em," roared a deep voice. "Kill 'em!"

That was Ramage—a shadow reared before Rand, head, torso and pumping legs, skidded to a halt. A gun glittered. Rand hit the man, shoulder on, knocking him down. Somewhere a wicked, sledging fire broke loose, answered from the encircling ring. Beaver's fierce and fiery battle cry was echoed by Cappy's shrill treble. From every angle guns were waking, hammering at the night's silence.

The stalwart Cajun recruit died just inside the fence, soundlessly and not far from Rand. Scorning to crouch, he had flung himself full into the arc of fire. His hopes and dreams were washed out and Rand's last scruple vanished. Afterwards he could recall nothing but firing, loading and firing at the flashes, pressing inward, a fighting machine obeying a primal instinct to crush and destroy.

He fought toward the opening cabin door and, facing it, saw two men emerging. He fired, dropped one, fired again and missed as the second man found the shadows. It was Sam Ramage, and he carried a handleless satchel under his arm. Rand gave chase.

Gunfire lashed back at him and he swore, stumbling blindly. Ramage knew the ground; Rand didn't. The man lost himself among the snorting mules, within the inner corral.

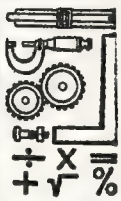
The fight was running out. The defenders, beset from all sides, lacking a directing voice, broke and pounded away into the night, leav-

SUCCESS!

How to Get Along in this World

Here, gathered together for the first time, are 5000 gems of worldly wisdom on how to live joyously, successfully . . . how to handle people, make money, be happy. Written out of **actual experience** by the best brains of mankind . . . during the past four thousand years! To-the-point, **workable** instructions on getting ahead. Only $1. Included are lessons on **how to use** these quotations in your daily life. Clip and mail coupon below for FREE details today.

Short-Cut Mathematics
COMBINED WITH
Practical Mechanics Simplified



Be a "master mind." Learn how to juggle figures, do baffling tricks with numbers. Add long columns of figures this lightning-quick, short-cut way. Multiply 4 figures by 4 figures without old-fashioned multiplication. Here are speedy, simplified systems used by stage "wizards," expert accountants, engineers. Only $1. Course includes illustrations, problems, answers. Mail coupon below!

SUPER JU JITSU

Now...get tough DOUBLE-quick!

Fearnoman. The bigger they come the harder they fall. Super Ju Jitsu is easy to learn. Big illustrated self-instruction course shows you how to disarm, disable and capture an armed attacker—**with only your bare hands!** Get amazing details at once—mail coupon below.

how to write better letters

Make **your** letters CLICK! Learn to put warmth and sparkle into business and social correspondence. Practical *brass-tacks* instruction on writing successful job-getting application letters, exciting keen-witted friendly letters, etc. **ACTUAL EXAMPLES** show tested ways of packing your letters with vitamins. Fascinating details on request . . . FREE. Just mail coupon below today!

CARTOONING MADE EASY

New Self-Instruction Course

Learn how to draw funny pictures for **money** —caricature, comic strip, gag-cartoon, political and editorial cartoon, etc. Practical **simplified** method takes out all the mystery. Step-by-step lessons for home-study. Excellent SPARE-TIME training for pleasure and profit. **FREE** interesting details on request. Just send name and address on coupon below.

MAGIC AND CARD TRICKS

HOW to PERFORM for FUN and MONEY

Mystifying stunts made easy. **Secrets of magic** revealed in new illustrated course. Teaches tricks with coins, handkerchiefs, balls, ropes, etc. Shows you how to protect yourself from professional gamblers! Get the "inside" information on baffling stage performances. Learn how to be a magician and entertain friends. Mail coupon for **FREE** details.

NELSON CO., Dept. 1C05 321 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago 4, Ill.
Write today for complete details on any of these SELF-INSTRUCTION COURSES. Send coupon below for the world-famous copyrighted Success-Catalog—it's FREE, on request.

FREE details . . . mail coupon!

NELSON CO., Dept. 1C05, 321 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago 4, Ill.
Please send me—FREE and without obligation—illustrated Success-Catalog containing information about the course (or courses) I have checked below. No salesman will call.

☐ Success! ☐ How to Write Better Letters
☐ Short-Cut Mathematics ☐ Easy Made Cartooning
☐ Super Ju Jitsu ☐ Magic and Card Tricks

NAME .....
ADDRESS .....
CITY ..... STATE .....

Pays HOSPITAL BILLS for Whole Family

Costs 3c a Day for Adults
Only 1½c a Day for Children

It's here! The new Family Hospital and Surgical Expense Policy you need and want! One policy insures whole family—mother, father, children, anyone from 3 months to 65 years. No medical examination. Pays up to $510.00 hospital and surgical bills for EACH and EVERY person insured. Pays up to $100.00 doctor's fees for operations. Pays up to $50.00 for operating room, medicines, ambulance, etc. Covers sicknesses, accidents, operations, childbirth, female disorders, and many other disabilities not covered by other policies. You select your own doctor and hospital. This full-coverage Family Hospital and Surgical Policy issued DIRECT to you at special family rates by big, strong company with over $3,000,000.00 in assets. Investigate! SEND NO MONEY, but mail the coupon below quick for full details—sent FREE. No agent will call on you. Act today!

STERLING INSURANCE CO
4342 Sterling Bldg., Chicago 11, Ill.
Send me your FREE INSPECTION Offer of LOW-COST Family Hospitalization Plan.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ STATE_____

MAKE THIS **SUIT YOURS** NEW PLAN

Earn CASH Showing to Friends!

Write at once if you want this fine made-to-measure suit! You can get it by taking a few orders from friends, and earn up to $10.00, $12.00 in a day. Your personal suit helps you take more orders with Pioneer latest style, made-to-measure guaranteed suits at amazingly low prices. Also complete line of Ladies' Tailored Suits. No experience, no money needed. Write today for FREE SAMPLES—telling about yourself—age, etc. No obligation—act now!

PIONEER TAILORING COMPANY
Congress & Throop Sts., Dept. R-1096, Chicago 7, Ill.

For PEACE TIME OPPORTUNITIES

ACCOUNTANCY

Streamlined, home study training by C.P.A.'s. Start at beginning or at any point in Accounting. Moderate cost; easy terms. Placement service. Ask for free booklet, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays." No obligation.

LaSalle Extension University 417 S. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 3334-H Chicago 5

ASTHMA

SYMPTOMS RELIEVED. Write today for free information and special money back offer.
W. K. STERLINE, 610 Ohio Ave., Sidney, Ohio

Getting Up Nights Makes Many Feel Old

Do you feel older than you are or suffer from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Swollen Ankles, Rheumatic Pains, Burning, scanty or frequent passages? If so, remember that your Kidneys are vital to your health and that these symptoms may be due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles—in such cases Cystex (a physician's prescription) usually gives prompt and joyous relief by helping the Kidneys flush out poisonous excess acids and wastes. Get Cystex from your druggist today. Take it exactly as directed and see the results in your own particular case. Under our guarantee unless completely satisfied you simply return the empty package and get your money back. So get Cystex today. Three guaranteed sizes Only 35c, 75c, $1.50 at your druggist.

Cystex
Helps Flush Kidneys

ing their dead. Rand rallied his men in the cabin. The first objective had been won at a cost of one man and several superficial wounds.

With the storm drawing off, a guard was set. A fire was lighted and Rand directed the repairing and greasing of the weathered wagons. Throughout the night they worked, always ready for a counterattack that didn't materialize.

NEXT day, the burial of one man went unnoticed in pulsing Westport. Coralee and Milt, Rand and Little Judge stood about an open grave where a pinch-faced skypilot, Nevada bound on the morrow, read a simple service for Ike Stovall.

That afternoon, Westport laughed as ten wagons, drawn by crowbaits and manned by Rand's every available hand, rolled to the Army warehouses and loaded supplies for Forts Larned, Lyon and Union. And the town laughed again when ten more wagons showed at Great Western Mercantile—loading goods consigned to far Santa Fe. Constantly, Rand searched the hazed silence, down the river. Where was Kaintuck? Had he and his men failed? Would there be mules? The time had dwindled now to hours.

That night a fire burned high in Prairie Freight's corral. Men sweated on the hundred and one last details, until exhausted. Coralee tended the cabin stove, bringing them hot coffee and food. In the early morning hours, Rand paced restlessly, listening for glad but now almost unhoped-for sounds.

Coralee came to him, frightened at the flint and ice of his mood. "Rand, look at me! You—you kissed me."

"Use fair weapons, Coralee."

"I'm a woman. You must love me a little. I want to see you smiling again, not battering yourself against this hard rock to make money for me. What is such money worth? The fight was lost before you ever saw it. Let it go at that."

He sighed, looked at his watch. "Time to shove off, Coralee. Sometime we'll talk this clear through."

From his wallet, Rand took half his currency, wrapped it in the chattel mortgage, pressed it into her hand. "If Kaintuck comes," he said, "tell him to pour those mules along the trail." He was whistling like a boy in the dark as he strode to supervise the harnessing. From here out it was a long bluff—without openers.

Cappy and Beaver came down from Westport with whisky on their breaths and ten so-called teamsters in hand—a rag-tag lot from the saloons. Somebody must tool the wagons. Spindle-legged mules were inspanned and

Rand gave the order, driving the lead wagon with Milt and Coralee on the box beside him. The rain had ceased.

Few words were spoken. What was there to say? The situation was eloquent and defeat rankled. They reached the road leading from town to the Missouri-Kansas border—the starting line. Horsemen came galloping after them. A bulls-eye lantern shot its beam along the train. The tall deputy reined in at the lead team.

"You—Quarternight!" he hailed. "I'm looking for you. You've been killing again."

Rand stared at him. "You've listened to Ramage, Marshal. His luck still holds, and he got away with that money robbed from the Stovalls. Some didn't get away. You'll find 'em buried along the fence—if you're interested. Right now we're outside your jurisdiction—and in a hurry. Next time I'm in town, I'll set you right."

His whip curled over the wheelers and he left the lawman sputtering. Up ahead, the flats were waking into hellish clamor. Camps were being struck. Breakfast fires were faint pinpoints of light through the murk. Excited voices floated back, muffled in the fog.

Through the confusion, Rand steered a course to the line where troopers patrolled, placing traffic, holding it along a three-mile front. Stalled and waiting, Coralee, Milt, Little Judge, the recruits and the men of Santa Fe Salvage gathered about Rand.

Lefty Battrick expressed open scorn. "Can't figger you, Quarternight. It's plain Kaintuck's drawed a losin' downriver. An' these crowbaits won't git us as fur as Blue River Crossin'."

Cappy, high with town likker, embraced a lead mule. "I love ever' one of the long-eared varmints," he proclaimed. "They'll do us fine until Kaintuck ketches up. I'll betcha ten jugs o' Santa Fe lightnin' the ol' panther cuts the buck. Eh, Rand?"

Ran nodded glumly. "Mustn't lose that hope, boys. It's all we've got."

"We got guts," rapped Beaver, thickly. "Even if Kaintuck's got his come-uppance we ain't licked. Put these here *mulos* on fat prairie grass an' they'll fool somebody. Anyhow, a race is more'n fast hoofin'. You mind the yarn about the turtle an' the jack-eared rabbit?"

It brought a meaningless laugh. Talk languished. As if to punctuate their fears, a rider came along the line of wagons, on a prancing horse. It was Ramage.

Coralee turned away. Rand approached the grinning horseman. "Interested in the loads, eh Ramage? So am I. Only one of us holds winners."

A SPLIT SECOND IN ETERNITY

The Ancients Called It COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Must man die to release his *inner consciousness?* Can we experience *momentary flights* of the soul—that is, become *one with the universe* and receive an influx of great understanding?

The shackles of the body—its earthly limitations—can be thrown off and *man's mind can be attuned* to the Infinite Wisdom for a flash of a second. During this brief interval intuitive knowledge, great inspiration, and a new vision of our life's mission are had. Some call this great experience a psychic phenomenon. But the ancients knew it and taught it as *Cosmic Consciousness*—the merging of man's mind with the Universal Intelligence.

Let This Free Book Explain

This is *not* a religious doctrine, but the application of *simple*, natural laws, which give man an insight into the great Cosmic plan. They make possible a source of great joy, strength, and a regeneration of man's personal powers. Write to the Rosicrucians, an age-old brotherhood of understanding, for a *free* copy of the book "The Mastery of Life." It will tell you how, in the privacy of your own home, you may indulge in these mysteries of life known to the ancients. Address: Scribe M.L.E.

The Rosicrucians

SAN JOSE (AMORC) CALIF., U. S. A.

Gas on Stomach

Relieved in 5 Minutes or double your money back

When excess stomach acid causes painful, suffocating gas, sour stomach and heartburn, doctors usually prescribe the fastest-acting medicine known for symptomatic relief—medicines like those in Bell-ans Tablets. No laxative. Bell-ans brings comfort in a jiffy or double your money back on return of bottle to us. 25c everywhere.

GET THIS **FINE SUIT** NO MONEY TO PAY!

BIG CASH EARNINGS TOO! Tailored suit yours without paying one cent—and big cash earnings too! Easy! Just take a few orders for famous Gibson Tailoring. Earn up to $10.00 in a day and get your own suit as EXTRA bonus. Dozens of rich new fabrics in latest styles, at LOW prices. FREE SAMPLES! Write today giving name, address, age, etc. for big complete outfit of actual samples and details of new BONUS SUIT and money-making plans—ALL FREE! SEND NO MONEY W. Z. GIBSON, INC. 500 S. Throop St., Dept. R-496, Chicago 7, Ill.

TOOTHACHE? DUE TO CAVITY

Get QUICK relief with Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops! "Cavity Toothache" frequently strikes at night. Be prepared. Buy either package from your druggist today. Keep it handy for children and adults. Follow easy directions.

DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS 25¢

COMB-A-TRIM The New Quick Trimmer

Something New! Trim your hair without any experience. It's easy! The excess hair comes off smoothly and easily by just pulling trimmer through hair like an ordinary comb. Save on hair-cut bills. . . . Trim your own hair or the whole family's. Send 59c and your Comb-A-Trim will be sent at once, postpaid. 59¢

SPECIAL OFFER Send $1.00 for 2 Comb-A-Trims. Save 18c 2 for $1 5 Extra Blades (Year's Supply) 25¢

COMB-A-TRIM CO., CAREW TOWER, Dept. M-2, Cincinnati, Ohio

MAGIC LIQUID MAKES **PHOTOS APPEAR**

On Scarfs, Ties, Stationery, Etc.

Reproduce any snapshot on *cloth, leather, wood, paper.* Simply apply liquid. Like magic photo appears within 2 minutes in broad daylight. Harmless to negative. Won't wash off. Full colors included. Complete kit for 100 photos only $1.29. Send no money, just name. Pay postman $1.29 plus few cents postage on delivery. Or send cash with order and get postpaid. (Canada $1.50 money order only.) Order today.

L & M Mfg. Co., Dept. 376, 229 W. Breckenridge, Louisville 3, Ky.

STAMMER?

GET THIS FREE BOOK!

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 44 years.

Benj. N. Bogue, Dept. 2964, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

Free for Asthma During Winter

If you suffer with those terrible attacks of Asthma when it is cold and damp; if raw, Wintry winds make you choke as if each gasp for breath was the very last; if restful sleep is impossible because of the struggle to breathe; if you feel the disease is slowly wearing your life away, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Co. for a free trial of a remarkable method. No matter where you live or whether you have any faith in any remedy under the Sun, send for this free trial. If you have suffered for a lifetime and tried everything you could learn of without relief; even if you are utterly discouraged, do not abandon hope but send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing. Address

Frontier Asthma Co.
462 Niagara Street

444-N Frontier Bldg.
Buffalo 1, New York

Ramage leaned over. He drew his hand across Rand's cheek, with a sound like a shot, spurred away. Rand drew his gun. Coralee threw herself upon him. "No, Rand. Not that!"

Rand holstered, trembling with rage. Coralee was right, but there was little satisfaction in the acknowledgment. Unnoticed, dawn had cracked. Bugles sent their eerie fifteen-minute warnings along the line.

It happened then.

There was a sudden swift roar of hoofs. Riders plunged along the wagon line, pouring stabbing crimson pencils of gun flame in an uneven staccato, a mule screaming its agony.

"SUNSET!" yelled Rand, and broke away from the girl. Plunging shadows reared, as Rand halted, firing. A rider screamed, plummeted from the saddle, bounced and lay still. Coralee was screaming something, her words washed out by gun-echoes. Bullets lashed at Rand, but he saw Santa Fe Salvage was fighting back. The attackers veered off, slanted into the fog and were gone, their sounds soon lost in a roar of inquiry from adjoining outfits.

Rand reloaded, strode rearward along the wagons, his anger mounting as he saw mules dead in their harness, some floundering, all the rest panicked by the blood smell. He heard the approach of galloping troopers, the cursing of his own men, and laughed bitterly. At least there were enough mules left to pull the stuff back to the warehouses. His gamble had failed.

Coralee came running to him and he took her in his arms.

Troopers flashed up, a sabered sergeant bawling, and Cappy shrilled his answer: "Sunset jumped us, Sergeant. Hold 'em from shovin' off an' we'll pay off fer this."

The trooper wagged his head. "It's a civil matter. Can't hold nobody after the startin' gun."

Beaver Blake cocked his head, drew his gun. "They're a-comin' back!" he bawled. This time won't none git away."

Roaring hoof echoes struck from the north. Through the fog came a snarled command: "Hey, pull in them bunch quitters. Turn 'em in!"

Rand loosed a joyful whoop. "Santa Fe Salvage!"

"Hoss an' beaver!" Triumph rode Kaintuck's cry. "Knowed that shootin' was you, younker! Mill them overgrowed jackrabbits down, boys. Head 'em!"

Cappy hazed the recruits into action. Hatfield unbridled a dead mule and limped into the enveloping fog. Minutes of confused but

purposeful action saw heavy, spirited animals being hooked to the wagons. Kaintuck split his force, half holding the herd, half harnessing. They worked with feverish haste, yet were far behind when a megaphoned call relayed along the line: *"Wagons away!"* A gun boomed.

A yell swept up from waiting prairie schooners. Men cursed their teams. Brakes cast off and whips cracked. Heavy wheels rumbled, shaking the ground, as long nursed patience flowered into realization. Somewhere, high and thin, a woman sang. Dogs leaped and barked before straining animals. Freight caravans and emigrant wagons rolled bravely into Kansas.

A dawn wind stirred the fog, crying an eerie note. It was as if prairie gods scoffed at the momentary joy of those who dared the Trail. Here was drama, and those struggling to launch Prairie Freight upon the test, paused to listen, caught in its spell.

Rand lashed them to their labors and, before the thunder of the westering hegira was muted by distance, the wagons stood ready to roll, the mules straining at the brakes. Rand's order crackled. Drivers leaped, each for his wagon.

Rand gripped Milt's hand. "You're boss, kid. Care for Coralee an' lean on Hatfield."

Milt nodded, gulped. Rand turned to the lawyer. "You're part of Prairie Freight, John. Give it the best you've got."

"Count on me, Rand. And luck to you all." His grip was strong.

Rand met Coralee's eyes. Tears weighted her lashes and on her pupils was that strange fire—something he had never beheld on a woman's gaze. *Strange critters, women,* he thought, walked over, took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Good-by, Coralee."

She clung to him. "When you come back—"

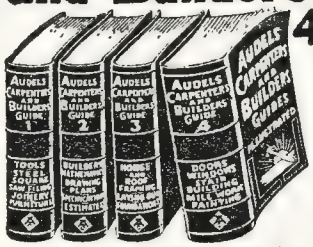
He kissed her and broke for the lead wagon. He rose by the hub, gathered the reins, kicked off the brake and yelled at the mules. The line of wagons leaped westward.

Once Rand looked back. The fog was breaking. The sun, a pallid platter, silhouetted Milt, Little Judge and Coralee. They stood close together, as if for mutual comfort—a reckless youth, grim-jawed before his first responsibility; a twisted hunchback, weak of body, clear of mind and unafraid; and a beautiful girl waving a handkerchief wet with her own tears.

That picture was to haunt Rand, sustain him, armor him against the hell of the Trail and its dread Jornada del Muerte, the Trek of Death!

THE END

AUDELS Carpenters and Builders Guides 4 vols. $6



Inside Trade Information for Carpenters, Builders, Joiners, Building Mechanics and all Woodworkers. These Guides give you the short-cut instructions that you want—including new methods, ideas, solutions, plans, systems and money saving suggestions. An easy progressive course for the apprentice and student. A practical daily helper and Quick Reference for the master worker. Carpenters everywhere are using these Guides as a Helping Hand to Easier Work, Better Work and Better Pay. To get this assistance for yourself, simply fill in and mail the FREE COUPON below.

Inside Trade Information On:

How to use the steel square—How to file and set saws—How to build furniture—How to use a mitre box—How to use the chalk line—How to use rules and scales—How to make joints—Carpenters arithmetic—Solving mensuration problems—Estimating strength of timbers—How to set girders and sills—How to frame houses and roofs—How to estimate costs—How to build houses, barns, garages, bungalows, etc.—How to read and draw plans—Drawing up specifications—How to excavate—How to use settings 12, 13 and 17 on the steel square—How to build hoists and scaffolds—skylights—How to build stairs—How to put on interior trim—How to hang doors—How to lath—lay floors—How to paint

THEO. AUDEL & CO., 49 W. 23rd St., New York City

Mail Audels Carpenters and Builders Guides, 4 vols., on 7 days' free trial. If O.K. I will remit $1 in 7 days, and $1 monthly until $6 is paid. Otherwise I will return them. No obligation unless I am satisfied.

Name.....

Address.....

Occupation.....

Reference..... PEB

$15,250,000 Life Insurance Issued Under New Method

A new method of issuing safe life insurance by mail, without doctor's examination, has been adopted by a well-known St. Louis company.

Actual policy is mailed to the applicant for 10 days' free inspection. No agent is permitted to call.

This company features a low cost special policy which sells for only $1.00 a month (½ the regular rate first 5 years), then $2.00 a month for 15 years. Policy is then fully paid up. It is straight life insurance of the 20-pay life type with double indemnity feature, and also liberal cash and loan values covered by approved securities deposited with the Insurance Department for the protection of all policyholders, wherever they may live. Policy will be issued to any person in good health, age 1 day to 55 years.

Readers of this magazine, by supplying the following information, can obtain this policy by mail. Send no money, just clip and mail the coupon to:

American Life & Accident Insurance Co.
230-D American Life Bldg. ● St. Louis, Mo.

Full Name .....
(Please print) City &
Address ..... State .....
Date of Birth— Color
Year..... Mo..... Day..... or Race.....
Sex .....Height..... Weight..... Age.....
Describe Occupation .....
.....
Name of Beneficiary Relationship
Amount of Ins.
Are you in good health?..... Now Carried.....

Check if under Age 46 and Double Amount is wanted. ☐

..... Signature of Applicant or Parent

DRAFTING

PREPARE NOW FOR A BETTER JOB

Begin *now* to turn spare time into money. Become a draftsman with opportunities for advancement. Be ready to qualify for a good paying job as industry turns to peacetime production. If you are now doing routine drafting work, prepare *now* for promotion to a better job in your field. Send name and address *today* for FREE information.

AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. DD348
Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37

Name .....
Street .....
City, State .....

LEARN MEAT CUTTING
At Home—In Spare Time

Get into the vital meat industry. Concise, practical Home Training based on 25 years proven instruction methods used at National's famous resident school. Prepares you for bigger pay as Meat Cutter, Supervisor, market manager or more money in your own store. Go as rapidly as your spare time permits. Diploma. Start NOW to turn your spare hours into money. Send for FREE bulletin today. No obligation. No salesman will call.

National School of Meat Cutting, Inc., Dept. K-7, Toledo 4, Ohio

DO YOU

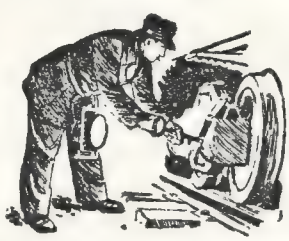
WANT a permanent business profession of your own? Then become a foot correctionist. Earnings of men and women in this greatly needed profession run as high as $50-100 weekly after a few weeks home training—not medical or chiropody—easy terms, no further capital needed, no goods to buy. 50th year. Write for free booklet.

STEPHENSON SYSTEM OF FOOT CORRECTION
14 Back Bay Boston 17, Mass.

REFRIGERATION AND AIR CONDITIONING SERVICE MECHANICS COURSE

Learn at home—how to start your own repair shop on little capital. No previous experience needed. Common school education sufficient. Splendid opportunity for older men. Prepare now for after the war. FREE illustrated booklet.

MECHANICS TRAINING SCHOOL
4701 W. Pico Dept. R-3 Los Angeles 6, Calif.



EXPERTLY PACKED

—with entertaining and informative fiction, feature articles and picture stories, covering every phase of railroading—old and new. One hundred and forty-six pages each month. Send $3 for a year's subscription.

RAILROAD MAGAZINE

205 E. 42nd St., New York City 17

(Continued from page 69)

ah-h!" Lane pulled him down, and there was blood all across one side of his face, but his big paws caught blindly at the crank. "Now!" The Gatling began to roll.

THEY must have been crazed with the talk of Iron Hand's greatest medicine, Lane thought dimly. They were riding right into it. Men and horses going down, men and horses. But more coming, more, and there were enough of them to have ridden right over that little bunch of fighters below, helped by Gatling medicine or not.

The smoke of the gun's own firing was closing down now. Lane saw through a haze. But that charge was breaking, he could see that much. Howling riders fleeing back, riderless horses; and all about the Gatling itself now the scream and thud of lead, whether from the hunters below, or from the Indian guards coming back Lane didn't know.

It didn't matter. The Gatling stopped again and the sergeant tried to swing a fresh drum into place and instead went down on his face, with a stricken grunt. Lane finished it for him. He was firing again. One man could work one of these Gatlings by himself, for a time. But the weakness of the big guns, even though they had the firepower of a hundred men, was that ten men could knock one out.

He was hit, Lane knew. The Gatling was shot dry again, red-hot. Darkness came and went and some times it must have stayed awhile, but he knew it was time to get up and dump that gun, if he could. Roll it down the slope, maybe, his drugged mind suggested dazedly, get it out where those gnawing hunter rifles could stop any desperate, last-minute attempt of red riders to retrieve great medicine gone wrong. For this was disaster that Iron Hand had wrought, and for himself. Even in the smoke, Lane McCoy knew.

He was up, he was shoving, with a staggering, drunken persistence and all of a sudden faces were coming at him. He knew that much. Some of them were painted, black and red bands and glaring eyes and they must be Comanches. But some—that looked like a buffalo hunter Lane had known somewhere, he couldn't remember where, and that one—that certainly was Brent Hagen.

It looked like he was shooting. But the Gatling was rolling away now, it must be on the down-slope. Rolling right toward Brent Hagen's face. Straightening, Lane McCoy fought hard for a voice.

"There—there's your damned gun back, Hagen. Pick it up." That was all he remembered.

When he came to, he was drowsily aware of soft voices and once again, moisture against his lips. But it tasted good. He said something and somebody gave him a drink and it was good water. He even knew the taste, not stinking, as most of the water was out here, but instead even faintly sweet. That was Cottonwood Spring water.

Then he knew the face above him was Martha McAuer's. So it was all right. He smiled up at her, heard her quick breath.

"The—gun," he managed. "Moynahan and I—kind of bought it back. Did Hagen—"

"Oh, you must lie still!" she said, in a sort of breathless rush, and her hands, anxious against his forehead, said still more. Pleasant things. "The gun is right over there. Against the bank. They brought it in. And—" she hesitated—"Captain Hagen was shot in that last flurry up there on the hill. When they saw you trying to roll the gun down to us, away from those Indians, and went up. They—say he's dying."

"And Sergeant Moynahan is badly hurt, but they think he'll pull through," she added. "I'm glad. He—he told us about it. We—thought the gun was shooting at us, at first, and—" Now she was breathless, coloring. "I—I was shooting too."

"If you hit me, I don't mind," Lane murmured. "But—the Indians? Did they—"

"They're gone, and you did it, Lane! Turned their own medicine against them. And we captured Iron Hand, he rode right up to the wagons, all alone, before they shot him off his horse, and, and—oh my dear! Can I tell you?"

"Go on."

"They laid him down near Captain Hagen after—after it was all over, and he cursed Brent. Cursed him for selling him bad medicine, and Brent Hagen admitted it. He confessed to that big partner of yours and some of the other hunters that he had sold that Gatling gun to Iron Hand, while we were down on the Rio Grande. That—that will clear you, Lane!"

"Does it mean much to you, Martha?" Lane asked, and saw his answer in her eyes. "All right." Contentedly, he reached for her hand. "Now if you can remember what you just called me, darlin'. Just want to be sure."

Ten minutes later, when Big Herman looked in, he was still holding her hand. Big Herman observed, tried hard to look disgusted, and almost succeeded.

"Damn Yankee!" he said. "What you want with him, Marthy? When you'll wanta, yuh won't be able to kill him!"

THE END

DID GRAY HAIR Rob them of $95 a Week?

Now Comb Away Gray This Easy Way

Gray hair is risky. It screams: "You are getting old!" To end gray hair handicaps *all you now have to do is comb it once a day* for several days with a few drops of Kolor-Bak Sprinkled on your comb, and afterwards regularly only once or twice a week to keep your hair looking nice. That's all you have to do. *No muss; no fuss; no mixing.* Nothing could be simpler and easier to use. Kolor-Bak is a solution for artificially coloring gray hair that imparts color and charm and abolishes gray hair worries. Grayness disappears within a week or two and users report the change is so gradual and so perfect that their friends forgot they ever had a gray hair and no one knew they did a thing to it.

Make This No-Risk Test

Buy new Kolor-Bak at your drug or department store today. The makers positively guarantee it must make you look years younger and far more attractive or your money back.

SONG POEMS WANTED

Song poems set to music by famous Hollywood Motion Picture composer-arranger. Your song recorded by noted radio singer. Send your poem today for consideration and liberal offer.
HOLLYWOOD MELODIES, P. O. Box 2168K, Hollywood 28, Calif.

NO Occupational Restrictions *NOT Contestable

Triple INDEMNITY
LIFE INSURANCE
POLICY PAYS MAXIMUM BENEFITS
$3000.00

Policy Costs Only $1.00 a Month

Provide for those you love this wise, easy way. Only a few pennies a day will pay for TRIPLE INDEMNITY LIFE INSURANCE, backed by Legal Reserves. Old reliable Pioneer Life Insurance Company offers this assured protection without restrictions as to your Occupation, Travel or Residence and includes *valuable Incontestability Clause—all as plainly stated in the policy. Men, women and children from 1 day to 70 years of age eligible. No Red Tape—No Medical Examination! Full details sent by mail. No Agent will call. Write at once for FREE inspection offer. DON'T DELAY!

COMPLETE LIFE PROTECTION
POLICY PAYS for
LOSS of LIFE
DUE TO
ANY CAUSE!

PIONEER LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
8611 Pioneer Building • Rockford, Illinois

NEVER SCRATCH
ITCHING SKIN

Do This for Quick Relief

Does the almost unbearable itching of externally-caused eczema make you want to scratch, Scratch, SCRATCH? Would you like to see that fiery redness subside quickly and the scaly skin become soft and smooth? Then get a 25c jar of Sayman Salve and apply this medicated ointment to the affected areas tonight. Let it help quickly ease the tormenting itching and painful soreness.

SAYMAN SALVE

Store Route Plan
PAYS BIG MONEY

SELL COUNTER CARD PRODUCTS
Build a good-paying business of your own. Call on dealers of all kinds; show nationally-advertised Aspirin, Vitamins, Cosmetics and 200 other necessities. Big 5c and 10c retail packages, high quality. Attractive counter display sells goods fast. Free book gives amazing facts. Write!
WORLD'S PRODUCTS CO., Dept. 69-E, Spencer, Ind.

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50—Many Swedish Massage graduates make $50, $75 or even more per week. Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE—Now! The College of Swedish Massage Dept. 595C, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11

Sure, the lads who fly the planes, run the tanks, bring our fighting men to shore are doing a grand job of softening up the enemy . . .

But don't forget, it's the slugging, dogged U. S. Infantryman—the doughboy—who really carries the ball. He's the lad who gets in there and fights it out, who takes the steel, the bullets . . . takes them in his stride . . . and finally takes over.

Keep Your Eye on the Infantry—The Doughboy Does It!

(Continued from page 8)

in a hide bag and covered with melted grease. Then there was *penole* or "cold flour"—parched corn pounded fine, mixed with sugar or molasses and cinnamon, then diluted with water and stirred. This was nutritious fare, though I imagine tastier dishes have been invented—half a bushel would last a man thirty days.

And maybe you think dehydrated vegetables were just invented? Not a bit of it—the pioneers knew all about them, and probably cursed them just as heartily as their G. I. descendants are doing today. They called them dessicated vegetables, which comes to the same thing. You took a bunch of carrots, for example, and pressed them till all the juice was out, then dried them in an oven till they were hard as a rock and about a tenth the original size. When you had to eat them, you put them in water and they swelled up again—a piece of the stuff the size of your palm would bloat up to fill a large bowl and feed four hungry men.

Feeling better about rationing by now? Wait till I tell you about the honey-balls. One wagon-train reported encountering a marsh where a certain kind of honey-producing, willow-like plant grew. In summer, these plants were always covered with brown, elongated insects which fed on the honey.

Indians who lived in the vicinity used to go into the marshes and gather this honey, rolling it into fist-sized balls. Some of these they sold to the travelers, who enjoyed them very much. The balls looked like wet mash and had a sweet, spicy flavor. But the wagon-train men lost their appetite for the delicacy after they examined it a little more closely and discovered that its main ingredient was not honey, but insects.

Then there was the experience of Frémont's men in California in 1845. They had long since run out of flour, and were glad to find that the local Indians made a very acceptable substitute—a meal which eaten raw or baked, was "rich, spicy and pleasant to the taste." They bought the meal regularly from the Indians, and as time went on the demand grew, until finally the Indians became careless in its manufacture, and Frémont's company began to find the legs, wings and bodies of grasshoppers in it.
It was grasshopper meal.
Good eating!

Well, Mr. Stout, we won't say we feel actually better about the whole thing, but we'll certainly look with a less jaundiced eye on whatever is put before us from now on—that is, unless we happen to be in Indian country.

THE BRANDING CORRAL

Hot-Headed Wild Man

Dear Strawboss:

Here's something that may give you a laugh, it did me. There was a character out in Washington in the early 1800's, named Moses Evans, that they called "The Wild Man of the Woods." Moses fancied himself as quite a ladies' man and had a vest made out of snakeskins that he was very proud of, only wore it on special occasions. Well, Moses was invited to a wedding, which pleased him greatly, and he went to the trunk and got out the old snakeskin vest.

Much to his surprise, though, from being put away so long, the vest had got somewhat stale.

The only thing that he could think of, in this dilemma, was to disguise the snake smell with perfumery, which he had heard of though it was a rarity out West. So he went to a local doctor, T. J. Heard.

"Why, Moses," said the doctor, serious as an undertaker, "I've got just the thing you want, yes sir. Step right in here."

Moses followed him in and the doctor stood up on a packing crate and got a bottle of cinnamon oil. "Now Moses," the doctor said, "kindly remove your hat and I'll pour a little of this elixir on your head."

RATIONED MOTORISTS

Now Get *EXTRA* GASOLINE MILEAGE

Now you can get up to 30% extra gasoline mileage with a Vacu-matic on your car. Quicker pick-up, smoother running, added power and precious gasoline savings guaranteed.

Automatic Supercharge Principle

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* Operates on the Supercharge principle. Saves gas. Automatically provides a better gas mixture. Guaranteed to give up to 30% extra gas mileage, more power and better performance.

FITS ALL CARS

Constructed of six parts, fused into a single unit. Adjusted and *sealed at the factory.* Very quickly installed by anyone.

AGENTS TRIAL OFFER

Every car, truck, tractor a prospect. Send name, address on postcard for big money making offer and how you got yours for introducing.

Vacu-matic Co., 7617-1135 **W. State St., Wauwatosa 13, Wis.**

SAMPLE LESSON IN Free · DRAFTING

More good jobs now in Drafting. Learn AT HOME in spare time (or at our Chicago School). Send postcard for **FREE SAMPLE LESSON** and see how easy to learn at home.

CHICAGO TECHNICAL COLLEGE
C-240 Tech Bldg., 2000 S. Mich. Ave., 16 Chicago, Ill.

LAW

STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 35 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance"—NOW!

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 52-B, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

FOR BETTER JOBS - - GOOD PAY
Prepare DeFOREST'S A·B·C WAY
RADIO ELECTRONICS

The fast-moving, Billion Dollar Radio-Electronics Industry needs many trained men. Write for DeForest's BIG FREE "VICTORY FOR YOU" book. See how you may train yourself at home—in your spare time for these good jobs and satisfying pay checks of today—and for tomorrow's exciting OPPORTUNITIES. See how you may prepare for this field that includes FM Radio, Communications Radio, Electronics, Broadcast Radio, Motion Picture Sound, Radio Sales and Service, or a Radio Business of your own. No experience needed to start. Earn while you learn. *Mail the coupon today!*

THESE FIGURES SPELL OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRAINED RADIO MEN

- More than 60,000,000 Radios in the U. S.
- Around 900 Radio Broadcasting Stations.
- More than 8,750,000 Auto Radios.
- More than 90,000 Radio Retailers.
- Almost 2,000 Aviation Radio Transmitters.
- Around 6,300 Police Radio Transmitters.
- More than 1,000 Radio and Parts Manufacturers.
- Thousands of boats, hundreds of trains are Radio Equipped . . . (Another promising postwar field!)

A. "LEARN-BY-DOING" FROM PRACTICAL EQUIPMENT Make 133 interesting Radio-Electronic experiments at home — from the use of eight BIG KITS of Radio parts and assemblies.

B. SHOW "LEARN-BY-SEEING" MOVIES at home through use of a genuine DeVRY 16mm movie projector and films *to help you learn Radio . . . faster . . . easier.*

C. GET 90 INTERESTING, MODERN, WELL-ILLUSTRATED loose-leaf lessons, prepared under the supervision of Dr. Lee DeForest, who is often called "the father of Radio."

Employment Service: DeFOREST'S provides an *effective* EMPLOYMENT SERVICE which has long-established contacts with many employers. MAIL THE COUPON!

VETERANS
See how DeForest's helps you prepare for a good pay job or a Radio sales or service business of your own.
CHECK THE COUPON!

DeFOREST'S TRAINING

DeFOREST'S TRAINING, INC.
2535-41 N. Ashland Ave., Dept. PP-3J
Chicago 14, Illinois, U.S.A.

Please send me your "VICTORY FOR YOU" book and KIT FOLDER, FREE.

Name_____ Age_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

☐ If under 16, check here for special information.
☐ If a veteran of World War II, check here.

Moses did as he was asked, and the good doctor poured out a liberal dose of the oil on his hair. Moses was delighted with the smell, which he would have chosen even if he had had a large array to pick from. Thanking the doctor, he replaced the hat on his head and proceeded to the wedding.

Arriving there, he cornered the nearest matron, swept off his hat releasing a cloud of cinnamon smell, and invited her to dance. Moses, besides his other accomplishments, was also adept in the dances of the day, and at "cutting the pigeon wing," "knocking the backstep" and "coming down on the double shuffle" he had no peer. This last was his specialty and he always put everything he had into it. And so, when he came to the double shuffle, as usual he began to get pretty warm. The cinnamon oil, which was sluggish and had not yet penetrated to his scalp, began to filter down there. As he went on dancing, trickles of it found their way down his perspiring face.

He borrowed his partner's fan, thinking he was simply overheated, but instead of getting better, the fiery itching in his scalp and chin continued growing fiercer. At last, so they say, the old-timer let out a yell that split some eardrums and broke all speed records heading for water.

And that's all there is in the mailsack this time, amigos. Next month we'll be back with odd facts about the West, grouches, personal histories and anything else the Gang feels like blowing off steam about. Till then—

Hasta luego!

—STRAWBOSS

Classified Advertising

Detective Training

DETECTIVES—Make Secret Investigations. Experience unnecessary. Particulars FREE. WAGONER, R-125 West 86th, N. Y.

Detective Training. Phillips Secret Service, 1917-P North Kenneth, Chicago 39, Illinois.

Educational

MEN—WOMEN, earn CGA degree at home, analyzing handwriting. Graduates report up to $1.00 hourly. 3000 word illustrated lesson, GRAPHO-ANALYST and surprise free. INSTITUTE, (AD), Joplin, Missouri.

For Inventors

PATENT PROTECTION. Information and Invention Record Free. RANDOLPH & BEAVERS, 573 Columbian Bldg., Washington, D. C.

Horse Training School

LIKE HORSES? Learn to break colts; stock horses; teach circus tricks; gait show horses. Lots of jobs. Doctor Book FREE. ANIMAL LOVERS ASSN., G111, Tarzana, Calif.

Money Making Opportunities

RAISE TURKEYS the new way. Write for free information explaining how to make up to $3,000.00 in your own backyard. Address National Turkey Institute, Dept. 88, Columbus, Kansas.

WANT FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE? I've helped hundreds. Dr. Tibolt, 25PP, 185 Godfrey, Philadelphia 20.

Nurses Training School

MAKE UP TO $25—$35 A WEEK as a trained practical nurse. Learn quickly at home, spare time. Easy tuition payments. Earn while you learn—many earn hundreds of dollars while studying. Easy to understand lessons, endorsed by physicians. High school not required. Our 45th year. Write for free booklet and sample lesson pages. Chicago School of Nursing, Dept. SD-2, Chicago.

Old Money Wanted

WILL PAY $10.00 EACH FOR CERTAIN LINCOLN PENNIES! Indianheads $50.00; Dimes $1,000.00. Catalogue 10c. Federal Coin Exchange, 2-PP, Columbus, Ohio.

We purchase Indianhead pennies. Complete coin catalogue 10c. Waltman, 398 Broadway, New York.

Patent Attorneys

INVENTORS: Learn now—without obligation—how to protect and sell your invention. Secure "Patent Guide" Free. Write—CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON, Registered Patent Attorneys, 526-C Adams Building, Washington, D. C.

INVENTORS—Patent Your Invention. Secure book, "Protect, Finance and Sell Your Invention." No obligation. McMORROW and BERMAN, Patent Attorneys, 150-V Atlantic Building, Washington 4, D. C.

Photo Finishing

At last! Roll developed, all your snapshots handcolored as beautiful as most actual colored photography, 35c. Hand colored reprints 4c each—12 for 45c. NATIONAL PHOTO ART COMPANY, Janesville 24, Wisconsin.

ROLLS DEVELOPED—25c Coin. One Day Service. 8 Gloss Deckle Edge Prints. CLUB PHOTO SERVICE, Dept. 16, La Crosse, Wis.

Poems—Songwriters

SONGWRITERS: Melodies supplied without charge by recognized Hollywood composers. Lead sheets and records furnished. Cinema Song Company, Box 670A-15, Beverly Hills, Calif.

POEMS WANTED to be set to music. Free examination. Send poems. McNeil, Master of Music, 510-A South Alexandria, Los Angeles, California.

SONGWRITERS: PROTECT YOUR IDEAS! HOLD MATERIAL! Learn SAFE procedure! Write: SONG SERVICE, 333 West 56th, New York 19.

SONGWRITERS: Send poems for Immediate Examination and FREE Rhyming Dictionary. RICHARD BROTHERS, 30 Woods Building, Chicago.

POEMS WANTED FOR MUSICAL SETTING. Five Star Music Masters, 620 Beacon Building, Boston.

SONGWRITERS: Interesting Proposition. Write: PARAMOUNT SONG-RECORDING STUDIO L-75, Box 190, Hollywood, Calif.

SONGWRITERS: Royalty Contract Free. Write for details. Puritan Publishing Co., 843 S. Dearborn St., Chicago 4, Ill.

Classified Advertising
(Continued)

Profitable Professions

MEN! WOMEN! Learn Profitable Profession in 60 days at home! Make $40-$75 week. Swedish Massage graduates in big demand. Work full or spare time. Win independence, security. Write for booklet and FREE details. COLLEGE OF SWEDISH MASSAGE, Dept. SC-45, Chicago, Illinois.

Salesmen Wanted

START YOUR OWN BUSINESS on our capital. Always your own boss. Hundreds average $6,000 to $12,000 annual sales year after year. We supply stocks, equipment on credit. 200 home necessities. Selling experience unnecessary to start. Wonderful opportunity to own pleasant, profitable business backed by world wide Industry. Write Rawleigh Co., Dept. C-U-PBL, Freeport, Ill.

Schools

WHY DON'T YOU WRITE? Writing short stories, articles, etc., will enable you to earn extra money. In your spare time we teach you to write the way newspaper men learn—by writing. Free "Writing Aptitude Test" tells whether you possess the fundamental qualities essential to successful writing. Write today! NEWSPAPER INSTITUTE OF AMERICA, Suite 556-C, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

Used Auto Parts

HAVING CAR TROUBLE? USED, GUARANTEED auto, truck parts—save money. Transmission specialists. Describe needs; immediate reply. VICTORY, 2439-B Gunnison, Chicago 25.

★ UP THE TRAIL ★

LOOKING over back issues of this column, it occurred to us that from the way we've talked about the frontiersman's virtues, some of you might have got the idea that he was a little tin god. Well, maybe he was—but like the rest of us, he had feet of clay.

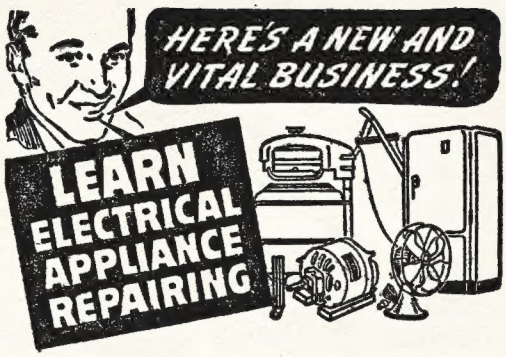
We've been emphasizing the courage and resourcefulness, the skill and endurance, that the builders of the West had, because we think those qualities are equally important today—but don't imagine that those men were an entirely different brand of human being than we grow nowadays. They did brave things and foolish things, were kind and cruel, quick-witted and dull, loyal and treacherous.

Wild Bill Hickok was a brave man, but he was also a braggart and a cheerful liar. Custer's name is deservedly bright in the pages of our history, but it was his own blind bull-headedness that got him into the ambush where he and all his men died. Wyatt Earp, in his terms as marshal of Tombstone, played the game as close to the line between law and outlawry as he could—and maybe sometimes a little over the line. And so the list goes. Mike Fink, the riverman of song and story, who shot his former partner in cold blood. Curly Bill, the laughing outlaw, who never could remember how many men he had killed. Garrett, Tilghman, Buckskin Frank, Cody, Masterson—there's hardly one of them who, if you wanted to take the trouble, couldn't be made out to be the blackest blackguard that ever stalked God's green earth.

And that's just the point we want to make. You could build up that kind of story about any one of them, using only facts—but it still wouldn't be a true story, and it would prove nothing except that those men were fallible—as who isn't? If you want to get a new slant on name-calling, look up a good biography of Lincoln sometime and see what his enemies said about him. Or Wilson, or Theodore Roosevelt—take your pick. The man never lived so blameless that his enemies couldn't find some disreputable part of his private life to expose, or invent one if there weren't any.

In the same way, it's inevitable that the great deeds of some of the West's heroes have become a little greater in the telling. But if you probe beneath the exaggeration and distortion that time has laid over them, subtract the minor lapses from courage or honesty that don't matter because they are so few, then you'll find that the men who built our nation were in truth a breed to be proud of. Not because "there were giants in those days", but because, with all their faults—which are our faults—they rose to the greatness that was in them, accepted it and put it to work for themselves and their posterity . . . just as we, in these times which are scarcely less troubled than theirs, can do if we will.

—The Editor.



Offers Big Money — Independence

If you are mechanically inclined—can hold and use tools it will pay you to learn electrical appliance repairing. Operate from your garage, basement, etc. Work as many hours as you wish—the appliance repairman is his own boss. On many types of repairs it is usual for a repairman to charge on the basis of $5.00 to $6.00 an hour!

No Previous Experience Needed

Profusely illustrated our new course shows you in simple, easy to understand language plus drawings and photographs, how to make each repair on refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, motors, fans, irons, etc., etc. Explains and gives you a working knowledge of electricity, welding, nickel plating, etc. Shows you how to build the power tools you need and how to solicit and keep business coming to you. Not a theory course but an honest to goodness practical course written by and used by repairmen the country over. Price of course is so low that the savings on your own household appliances will pay for it. Act now! Send today for FREE literature. **Christy Supply Co., 2835 N. Central Ave., Dept. D-118, Chicago 34, Illinois.**

NOW JUST $1 A MONTH PROVIDES CASH WHEN YOU NEED IT MOST!
AMAZING NEW GOLD SEAL POLICY
Provides all-around protection, cash for almost every emergency! Issued by old-line LEGAL RESERVE company, yet actually costs less than $1 a month. Protection you need at a price you can afford!
Pays for ANY and ALL Accidents, ALL Common Sicknesses, as provided, even minor injuries. Disability benefits paid from first day. No waiting period. NO, this is NOT the usual "limited" policy. NO jokers. NO trick clauses. It's extra liberal!
Accumulated CASH BENEFITS
Up To $6000.00 for Accidental LOSS OF LIFE, LIMBS or SIGHT!
Up To $2400.00 for ACCIDENT DISABILITY at rate up to $100 Monthly for as long as 24 months!
Up To $300.00 for SICKNESS DISABILITY at rate up to $100 monthly for as long as 3 months!
Up To $650.00 for HOSPITAL EXPENSES as a result of either sickness or accident!

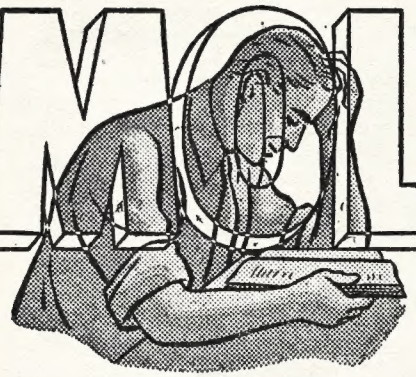
NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION

Policy issued BY MAIL at *big savings*. Ages 15 to 69. Actual policy sent for 10 DAYS' FREE EXAMINATION. Write for it today. No cost! No obligation. Send name, age, address, and name of beneficiary. Do it today! Provide for tomorrow!

The SERVICE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
4531 Service Life Building Omaha 2, Nebraska

YOUR FUTURE IS PLASTIC—

MOLD IT!



ANYTHING capable of being molded is plastic. So it's a word that applies to your future as well as to the materials of the plastics industry. There are giant possibilities in this field. Their realization depends upon the planning of *trained* men.

Within YOU, too, are great possibilities. Their realization depends upon your being a *trained* man. The world-famous International Correspondence Schools offer you the opportunity to obtain that *training* in your spare time, at low cost.

With *training*, you can mold your place in the new world to your heart's desire. A more responsible job, higher pay — whatever you want is attainable if you qualify as an *expert*.

The time to qualify — in plastics or any other industry—is *NOW*. Mail the coupon today and let I. C. S. tell you how!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3275-T SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me booklet and full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Schools
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Schools
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Schools
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Bridge Engineering
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Electrical Schools
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Internal Combustion Engines School
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Schools
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Airplane Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Shop Practice
- ☐ Steel Mill Workers
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Welding, Gas and Electric

Radio School
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing

Railroad School
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Schools
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric
- ☐ Steam Engines

Textile School
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Schools
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ City Letter Carrier
- ☐ College Preparatory
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ French ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating
- ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Post Office Clerk
- ☐ Railway Postal Clerk
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name..... *Age*..... *Home Address*.....

Present Position..... *Working Hours*.....*A.M. to*.....*P.M.*

City..... *State*.....

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.
British residents send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England.

DISCOUNT TO DISCHARGED VETERANS—SPECIAL TUITION RATES FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES

Over Two Million Readers Have Wept and Loved and Laughed with the Wonderful Nolans of Brooklyn!

"Excitingly beautiful— one of the outstanding fiction works of the year perhaps many years." —Chicago Sun

"Writing like this is rare." —Springfield Republican

"It sings" N. Y. Herald Tribune

"Lay your hands upon a copy, by whatever means at your command."—BOSTON GLOBE. Take it now as a GIFT!

FREE!

WITH DOLLAR BOOK CLUB MEMBERSHIP

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is the story of the Brooklyn Nolans. Francie, the daughter of the family, learned in her early years that the simple things of life—getting enough to eat, having a place to sleep, keeping clothed and being able to go to school—were not easy to get. But to Francie and her brother Neeley, the world was a shining place and every day too short for the adventures it held. Her father was a singing waiter who didn't always bring home the money he earned, but to the Nolans, poor as they were, money was not too important as long as they had each other.

Francie's life story is the story of a city girl who grew into beautiful womanhood because she chose to make life give her its glorious things. A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN is a book to own and enjoy and remember. A FREE copy will be sent you if you join the Dollar Book Club now

DOLLAR BOOK CLUB MEMBERSHIP IS FREE

—and it brings you amazing bargains like this!

THE DOLLAR BOOK CLUB is the only club that brings you books by outstanding authors, for only $1.00 each. This represents a saving to you of 50 to 75 per cent from the original $2.00 to $4.00 price. Every selection is a handsome, full-sized library edition printed exclusively for members.

Members are privileged to purchase as many Club books as they wish at the special price of $1.00 each. Although one selection is made each month. You do not have to accept a book every month; only the purchase of six selections a year is necessary.

The Economical, Systematic Way to Build a Library of Good Books

Dollar Book Club selections are from the best modern books—the outstanding fiction and non-fiction by famous authors. Such outstanding best sellers as THE PRODIGAL WOMEN, MRS. MINIVER KING'S ROW, DRAGON SEED, THE STRANGE WOMAN and THE SONG OF BERNADETTE were all received by members at $1.00 each while the public was paying from $2.00 to $3.00 for a publisher's edition, at retail.

300,000 discriminating readers are enthusiastic supporters of the Dollar Book Club. This huge membership enables the Club to offer book values unequaled by any other method of book buying.

Start Enjoying Membership at Once—Upon receipt of the attached coupon you will be sent a Free copy of A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN. You will receive each month the free monthly magazine called "The Bulletin," which is sent exclusively to members of the Club. This Bulletin describes the selection and reviews about thirty other books available to members at only $1.00. If you do not wish to purchase the next month's selection for $1.00, you may notify the Club and the book will not be sent you. You may request an alternate selection if desired.

Send No Money—Just Mail the Coupon—A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN will be sent you at once, FREE. DOUBLEDAY ONE DOLLAR BOOK CLUB, Garden City, New York.

MAIL THIS COUPON

FREE: "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn"

Doubleday One Dollar Book Club
Dept. 3 P.O.P., Garden City, New York

Please enroll me free for one year as a Dollar Book Club subscriber and send me "A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN" FREE. With this book will come my first issue of the free monthly Club magazine called, "The Bulletin," describing the one-dollar bargain book for the following month and several alternate bargains which are sold at $1.00 each to members only. Each month thereafter I am to have the privilege of notifying you in advance if I do not wish the following month's selection and whether or not I wish to purchase any of the alternate bargains at the Special Club price of $1.00 each. The purchase of books is entirely voluntary on my part. I do not have to accept a book every month—only six during the year to fulfill my membership requirement. And I pay nothing except $1.00 for each selection received, plus a few cents handling and shipping costs.

Mr.
Mrs. .....
Miss (Please Print)

Street and No. .....

Zone No.
City.....(if any).....

State .....

If under 21, age please.....

Slightly higher in Canada: 105 Bond St., Toronto 2, Canada

"It's a bull's-eye!"—says HI to HATT

It's silky flavor's made a hit with sev'ral million guys!
HATT
A lotta stuff tastes pretty good, but Kessler's—that's the prize
HI
SMOOTH AS SILK but not "High Hat"
KESSLER'S Private Blend
KESSLER'S
Private Blend
BLENDED WHISKEY
BLENDED BY JULIUS KESSLER DISTILLING CO., INC. LAWRENCEBURG, INDIANA
ONE PINT

KESSLER'S BLENDED WHISKEY

True Pre-War Quality

KESSLER'S PRIVATE BLEND. 75% Grain Neutral Spirits. 85 Proof. Julius Kessler Distilling Co., Incorporated, Lawrenceburg, Ind.